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Developing Social Work Skills in Online Environments: What Online MSW Graduates Tell Us

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Developing Social Work Skills in Online Environments:
What Online MSW Graduates Tell Us

by
Samuel W. Gioia

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
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Portland State University
2021

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Abstract

Social work education is an academic discipline that prepares students to support individual, family, and community wellbeing, and to advance policies for social equity. Despite the increasing use of online education for social work, many social work faculty believe that online Master of Social Work (MSW) programs do not adequately prepare graduates for direct practice (engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation) with vulnerable populations. Students from an online MSW program at a mid-sized urban research university were interviewed to learn (a) how well an online MSW prepared these students for direct practice with individuals, families, and communities; and (b) what instructional approaches best prepared them for direct practice social work.

This study finds that online education helps students to become effective social workers. Participants in the study said they benefited from a variety of learning tools and methodologies including live videoconference meetings, virtual office hours, taped lectures, readings, and virtual roleplays with transcribed feedback from instructors. Participants navigated obstacles in their education by extensive contact with their classmates through designed classroom spaces, spontaneous videochats and social media connections. Field placements, which occur face-to-face were essential to student learning. Their learning, however, was limited by the lack of direct practice courses and insufficient access to direct practice electives, since the program specialized in leadership and management. Without direct practice coursework some participants from rural areas had difficulties advancing into leadership positions in their organizations as they had

planned. Also, participants in remote locations said they had insufficient support from the social work program to establish strong field placements. Participants spoke of disabilities that they did not report and were not accommodated while they were in the program.

The findings of this study support several recommendations for online MSW programs. Social work programs specializing in policy and leadership need to include sufficient foundational courses and electives to prepare graduates for employment in direct practice roles which may be required for social work employment, licensure, and professional advancement after graduation. Since field practicums are a central part of social work education, educational programs need to devote additional resources to establish and maintain high quality field education in a broad range of community sites. Further research is needed on the presence of students with disabilities in online MSW programs, and programs need to provide information and support to accommodate these students.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Online higher education has grown every year since 2002, enrolling more than 3 million completely online students, with another 3 million taking a combination of online and campus-based courses, even as overall college enrollment has plateaued or dropped (Seaman et al., 2018). In 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all college classes were, by necessity, taught for an entire year in a remote format, rapidly implementing one form of online education as equivalent to the college classroom. Despite the rapid growth of many types of online education, educational leaders have remained concerned about the quality of online education to engage and retain students (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Online social work education has proliferated in the field of social work as well. Out of 255 Universities offering Master of Social Work (MSW) programs, 70 of them offer a completely online option (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2019). Yet, after almost two decades of experience with online education, many leaders in the field of social work education continue to express the concern that social work programs cannot sufficiently prepare students with advanced interpersonal skills in an educational environment that does not provide face-to-face observation and feedback from instructors (Levin et al., 2018). The most recent survey of social work faculty views on online education concluded:

Faculty in our study consistently perceived online social work education to be less effective in preparing students to become social workers than traditional, on-the-ground education . . . Our study also found that perceptions of effectiveness for

online education were lowest for practice-oriented competencies. (Levin et al., 2018, p. 784)

The academic literature on online social work education compares outcomes (grades and assignments) of online and face-to-face courses (Siebert et al., 2006), and includes feedback from faculty (Levin et al., 2018; B. Moore, 2005), current students (Siebert et al., 2006), and prospective employers (Curran et al., 2017). The outcome studies suggest that online education may be comparable to classroom education. Current and former social work students can offer important insight on how well online social work courses and programs have prepared them to be competent social workers. However, research has yet to analyze feedback from current students and graduates of online social work programs who are currently engaging in social work practice.

In this dissertation I posed two research questions: (a) How well do MSW students feel their online education has prepared them to meet the CSWE competencies for direct practice? and (b) What instructional practices in graduates' online education were most helpful in preparing them for achieving the key competencies? I investigated student experiences of online social work education by interviewing 11 students from an online MSW program to further understand how prepared these students thought they were to be effective practitioners in direct practice settings after they graduated.

Historical Perspective of Online Education

Higher education in the United States has increasingly used new technology to expand college access to potential students who cannot attend the traditional college campus and matriculate similarly to other students (Emmerson, 2005). For the last 175 years, each generation in the U.S. has seen the development of new means of delivering

educational content. For example, in the 19th century, the postal system allowed communication between teachers and students in remote locations allowing colleges to develop “correspondence courses” to meet the educational needs of students who could not access campus-based education. This made it possible for women and people from rural communities to benefit from advanced education and even get degrees without relocating to college campuses. In the 20th century, radio and telecommunications allowed college lectures to be broadcast across the country, again expanding the reach of higher education through technological innovation (Emmerson, 2005).

Today’s online education is a unique development in the history of distance education because of the potential for students and teachers to have reciprocal and frequent interaction both in real time and delayed, using a combination of video, audio, and text. The range of instructional methods allowed by internet technology allows for deeper and more spontaneous collaboration among students with greater flexibility in scheduling, while encouraging faculty to use new and innovative methods of instruction (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). While the advanced interactivity of today’s virtual classrooms distinguishes today’s distance education from 19th century correspondence schools, concerns remain about low engagement, and limited observation and feedback continue (Sawrikar et al., 2015).

Online Education Today

In 2017 6.3 million college students, or 32% of all college students, took an online course (Seaman et al., 2018). This represented a 5.6% increase in online enrollment in one year, while in that same year total undergraduate enrollment declined

1.2% and graduate enrollment remained the same. The percentage of students taking at least one online course has increased every year from 2012 to 2016 (Seaman et al. 2018). Of all online students, 79% find their online educational experience to be equal to or better than the traditional college campus and 79% believe that their online education was worth the cost (Magda et al., 2020).

Historically, more than 90% of university administrators have expected online education to play a role in the future of their institutions and 90% believed that within five years most college students will take at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Academic administrators believe that online learning is critical to the future of their institutions (63.3%) and 74% of administrators believe that online learning is equal to or superior to face-to-face learning (Allen & Seaman, 2016). By 2018, 35% of college students were taking at least one online, on track to meet that prediction until safety concerns due to the COVID pandemic in 2020 rendered all college courses online course (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Still, only 29.1% of administrators believe that their faculty support the efficacy of online education, a number that has decreased over the years (Allen & Seaman, 2014). An annual survey of perceptions of online education has reported that most university leaders believe that online education “takes more discipline” than face-to-face education (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Only a small percentage of university leaders (29.1%) believe that their faculty accept the value and legitimacy of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2014). A growing number of university leaders also believe that retaining students is a

more significant problem in online courses than in face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

As online programs have expanded in many academic disciplines, professional programs like social work, which prepare students to apply advanced knowledge in community settings, have also begun to utilize online education to prepare students to enter these professions. Professional programs in academia are monitored and accredited by external organizations that oversee standards and ensure that graduates of the academic programs are fully prepared to practice within the profession.

These professional programs face unique challenges and higher stakes in developing highly competent practitioners through completely online courses and programs. Graduates of professional programs will be providing essential services such as medical care, speech and hearing services, and social work to populations in need. If schools do not maintain the highest quality of education, community populations will not receive proper care. The profession of social work is particularly concerned that the growth of online education will compromise the quality of education and result in poorly prepared practitioners (Groshong et al., 2013).

The Profession of Social Work

The profession of social work addresses the complex needs of individuals and families while promoting social conditions that foster human potential. According to the National Association of Social Workers (2017),

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. (Preamble, para. 1)

The nature of the social work profession requires most social workers to work in highly sensitive situations, addressing difficult and intersecting problems with vulnerable populations, such as people suffering from mental illness, and children and families in distress. In such interactions, inadequate preparation can undermine the effectiveness of interventions. Poorly trained practitioners can even do harm to members of the community. As online education expands, programs which prepare future social workers must be rigorous as well as accessible.

Social Work Education

Social work education has experienced considerable growth with the development of the profession, beginning with a few training programs in the early 20th century and expanding to more than 700 accredited programs by 2007 (Hoffman, 2008).

The CSWE (2015) stated, “Social work education . . . shapes the profession’s future through the education of competent professionals, the generation of knowledge, the promotion of evidence-informed practice through scientific inquiry, and the exercise of leadership within the professional community” (p. 5).

Since an unskilled social worker can inflict harm on vulnerable clients, it is essential that future social workers receive rigorous education and oversight to meet the needs of the people they serve. Accredited social work educational programs serve as the gateway to post-graduate licensure, which will oversee the practice of social workers in the community.

Social work education occurs at the baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral levels. Generalist, or foundational social work education, teaches “generic practice processes to

work with client systems of all sizes, recognizes change across multiple system levels, and considers behaviors in the social environment” (Cox et al., 2019, p. 39).

Baccalaureate education (Bachelor of Social Work [BSW]) is considered to be foundational and generalist in purpose. Master’s level education in social work (MSW) overlaps bachelor’s education by including a first-year generalist focus, similar to BSW education, and a second year that includes advanced practice specializations (Hoffman, 2008). While each MSW program selects its own specializations, common specializations include mental health (clinical social work), social work with children and families, social work in health care settings, and social service administration.

Educational Competencies for Social Work

To protect the public, the CSWE has developed standards of excellence, or competencies, which are the basis for accrediting educational programs in social work. Competence is “the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being” (CSWE, 2015, p. 6). Degree programs for social work must demonstrate to CSWE how their curriculum addresses each of the practice standards and how students are evaluated on their achievement of those standards.

The competencies for social work education address a range of social work knowledge, values, and skills in domains such as ethical and professional behavior, the ability to effectively engage diversity and difference in practice, and the advancement of human rights and social justice (CSWE, 2015). The key competencies in question for

online social work education address students' ability to guide clients through change processes by engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation of services (direct practice). Social work students develop these competencies through classroom education and supervised social work field placements.

A social work classroom is a collection of face-to-face or online instructional activities that help students develop knowledge, values, and skills as well as cognitive or affective processes (CSWE, 2015). Instructional methods include lecture, discussion, modeling, problem-solving, process recordings, and role plays (Dennison et al., 2010). Many social work educators believe that online classrooms do not provide comparable opportunities to assess, instruct, and evaluate student progress towards competence (Levin et al., 2018; B. Moore, 2005; Sawrikar et al., 2015).

Field education is a central component or “signature pedagogy,” of social work education for both bachelor’s and master’s degree programs (CSWE, 2015). As a signature pedagogy, field education teaches the:

future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline—to think, to perform, and to act ethically and with integrity. Field education is the signature pedagogy for social work. The intent of field education is to integrate the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting (CSWE, 2015, p. 12)

Even in online programs, field education occurs face to face, exactly the same as in other modalities of program delivery. In some sense, there is no such thing as completely online social work education since every social work student in an accredited program receives face-to-face practice experience along with close observation and coaching by experienced social workers.

Online Social Work Education

Social work education advances the mission of social work to provide supportive services to vulnerable populations and underrepresented groups. Online social work education furthers this mission by expanding the benefits of social work education to underrepresented groups of students who cannot access social work education because of employment, family responsibilities, or location.

Initially, the field of social work was conflicted about the use of internet technology to help students develop competencies and meet the expected standards of practice. Among the early concerns was the lack of policy around the accreditation of online programs (Raymond, 2005). A major development in educational policy occurred in 2001 when CSWE began accrediting social work programs based on the achievement of educational outcomes, while encouraging innovation in program design and teaching methods to achieve those outcomes. This allowed social work programs to teach courses online as long as the programs could demonstrate student mastery of the needed competencies (Raymond, 2005).

Once accreditation policy for online social work programs allowed for a broad range of teaching modalities and methods, social work programs began to embrace the possibilities of online education. In 2008, the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* included, for the first time, a section on social work education and “electronic technologies” (Oulette & Westhuis, 2008). This article attributed the future need for distance education to the increased use of technology by students along with the need to accommodate the work and family lives of students. For these authors, technology promised to make both social

work education and practice more effective, widespread, and cost-effective (Oulette & Westhuis, 2008).

As familiarity with online education has grown, entire online programs have been developed to educate social workers at both bachelor's and master's levels. The CSWE (2019) currently accredits 25 online bachelor's programs and 70 online master's programs. These programs include both academic instruction (mostly online) and face-to-face interaction with clients with closely supervised field education. The instructors (including field educators) must certify that the student has achieved basic mastery of all of the required competencies in order for the student to pass the course, earn their degree, and later become a licensed social worker.

Faculty Concerns

Despite the rapid growth of online programs, social work faculty and administrators question the efficacy of the online classroom to meet the needs of the profession and protect the public. A 2005 survey of 81 social work faculty who had taught online found that face-to-face education was believed to be significantly more effective in 8 of 9 key content areas, and that teaching social work practice online was considered to be the least effective of all content areas (B. Moore, 2005). B. Moore (2005) concluded,

As social work educators pursue their efforts to assist students to become professionally socialized, develop the requisite social work knowledge and skills for practice, and experience personal and professional growth, careful consideration needs to be given to the ways in which Web-based instruction can facilitate or hinder these efforts. (pp. 64-65).

In follow-up study, social work faculty across the U.S. still believed that online education was less effective than face-to-face education at helping students to attain all

nine accreditation competencies, and that online social work education was not effective at helping students to attain any competencies attain any of the practice competencies at all (Levin et al., 2018). Given the 10-year gap between the studies, social work faculty's assessment of the effectiveness of online education was described as "intransigently low" (Levin et al., 2008, p. 787).

Social faculty may hold such low opinions of online education because of a belief that the immediacy and spontaneity of face-to-face education allows teachers to observe student growth and address areas where students may be lacking:

Being able to see a student's journey from exposure to comprehension of course content (and help catch lagging students before they fall too far behind), much of which may be nonverbal and which can be easily seen in the F2F mode, seems to be at the heart of teaching and learning satisfaction (Sawrikar et al, 2015, pp. 357-358).

Faculty in online classes may not detect when students do not understand the content or struggle to implement the professional practices that are modelled and coached in the classroom. Those students may then graduate even if they are unprepared for the settings in which they will be employed (Sawrikar et al., 2015).

Employer Perspectives

Employers are also concerned about the effectiveness of online social work education. A national survey found that a majority of human service administrators believed that online social work programs are not as effective as face-to-face programs (Curran et al., 2017). Respondents in the study believed that students in online classrooms do not have sufficient interaction with faculty and other students to develop the relational skills they need to be effective social workers once they graduate (Curran et al., 2017). It is not known how the opinions of these employer surveyed influence their

willingness to hire graduates of online social work program, nor has the study been replicated.

Social Work Students

Online social work education continues the trajectory of distance education in the United States by including students who are less likely to otherwise obtain their education. A demographic study of graduates of online MSW programs found students were more likely to be female and more likely to be from rural areas (CSWE, 2019).

The CSWE's (2019) study also found that that online MSW graduates were older than students in face-to-face programs, with more social work experience prior to their MSW education, and more likely to be employed in social service agencies while they attained their degrees.

Because they are likely to already be employed in social work settings, it is likely that MSW students begin their MSW education with more advanced skills than MSW students in campus-based programs, having already received some of the practice experience, observation, and feedback that MSW programs provide. Many online MSW students may already be competent social workers, having already received some of the intensive oversight and feedback through their employment that social work faculty provide in face-to-face classrooms. These students may not need some of the oversight that social work faculty are used to providing.

Still, social work students in online courses have reported a lack of feedback from faculty (McAllister, 2013; Siebert et al., 2006; Summers et al., 2005) and questioned whether their online education was as effective as the face-to-face education that other

students received (Siebert et al., 2006). Online social work students have reported more difficulties connecting with instructors and peers (McAllister, 2013) and expressed concern about the availability of instructors (Siebert et al., 2006).

Social work students who have found their online education to be effective say that the quality of instruction is a key factor (S. Cummings et al., 2015; Wilke & Vinton, 2006). While students and faculty across disciplines agree that the interaction between students and faculty is critical to the success of online education, they do not agree what successful interaction entails (Dennen et al., 2007; Gayton, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

The concerns about online social work education center on the lack of immediate interactions with students in an online curriculum. However traditional classrooms may also fail to fully engage students and offer formative feedback as well. Successful education, whether in a classroom or online, needs to follow sound pedagogical theory that engages students in active learning (Brookfield, 2006). Instruction in online settings follows the same principles of face-to-face instruction: (a) Teaching is centered on student learning, (b) Teaching is critically reflective, and (c) teaching is grounded in student perceptions of their learning (Brookfield, 2006, p. 17).

Yet online learning emphasizes different aspects of teaching due to the separation of students from instructors by place and time. Immediacy and responsiveness become even more important:

When instructors are relatively absent from the discussion, students begin to wonder: Why aren't I hearing more from the teacher? What is she doing while I am logging my way through these learning modules? What does she think about

the quality of my work? Why should I be taking so much time to express my ideas when she takes so little time to acknowledge them? (Brookfield, 2006, p. 199)

This concern about instructor responsiveness is supported by statements from students that something is lacking in online learning when the instructor is not physically present (e.g., Siebert et al., 2006).

Many of the criticisms of online social work education can be understood to say that teaching presence is not strong enough to provide students with the feedback they need to become competent social workers in the most sensitive areas of social work practice—direct engagement with clients and communities. In this dissertation I focus on the theory of Community of Inquiry which explains how effective instruction occurs in online settings and establishes effective teaching guidelines that can promote instructional immediacy and engagement.

The Community of Inquiry framework suggests that knowledge can be developed in online courses through enhancing the relationship between students and the course materials (cognitive presence), between students and other students (social presence), and between students and instructors (teaching presence; Garrison, 2011).

The Community of Inquiry framework contributes to the theory of online education by specifying the practices of teaching presence to be examined. Teaching presence includes direct instruction, design, and facilitation of discourse (Shea et al., 2006). Facilitation of discourse, for example, includes (a) identifying areas of disagreement, (b) seeking to reach consensus, (c) reinforcing student contributions, (d) setting a climate for learning, (e) drawing in participants, and (f) assessing the efficacy of the learning process (Shea et al., 2006).

When students learn (online or face-to-face), it is likely that cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence have occurred. Research on student experiences in online education may support Community of Inquiry theory and further explain how this theory works in practice.

Research on the Community of Inquiry shows us how online instructors can foster meaningful interaction to narrow the social distance that may be inherent in some online formats. Interviews with graduates of an online social work program may illustrate how, from a student perspective, meaningful interaction occurs and how online instructors can tell that students feel engaged in their learning experiences.

Problem in Practice

Leaders in the field of social work education continue to develop online programs, recognizing the potential to expand access to social work education through new forms of teaching and learning, and to develop a more diverse workforce in the field by including working students, women, and students from rural areas. This expansion is supported by early research on online social work education which concludes that online education is of comparable quality to traditional education because students do just as well on assignments and achieve similar grades whether they are participating online or face-to-face.

Yet comparison studies citing grades and outcomes on assignments have not satisfied the concerns of educators, employers, and students. Social work educators face the dilemma of providing more access to social work education through online courses and programs, even when they reportedly doubt the effectiveness of this education to

fully prepare students to interact with clients and communities. In this dissertation I propose to learn more about the quality of online social work education by interviewing students and graduates of online programs to find out how their education has served them in practice.

Research Problem

The benefits of online education are compelling for many students and universities, as they expand the range of social work education to new communities and to groups of students who previously could not become social workers. We know that faculty, administrators, and employers believe that online education is inferior, but we do not know what happens when students apply their learning in their own communities after graduation. The focus of this dissertation is on MSW graduates' perception of their online education, particularly in their skills for direct practice. What we can learn from these participants will help educational leaders to address concerns expressed in the research literature and improve the effectiveness of online social work education.

In this study I inquired about the ways social work students were able to implement CSWE competencies that are most applicable to direct social work practice by interviewing current students and graduates who participated in an online MSW program. My research questions were: (a) How well do MSW students feel their online education has prepared them to meet the CSWE competencies for direct practice? and (b) What instructional practices in graduates' online education were most helpful in preparing them for achieving the direct practice competencies?

Significance of the Research

At the heart of all learning is the relationship between a teacher and a student. The significance of that relationship does not decrease with distance or technology, but the instructional practices may change. Discovering new and effective ways to teach in a digital environment can not only improve access to higher education, but enhance learning and service to communities as well. The development of effective online education is especially important in the field of social work, where students are preparing for complex interactions with vulnerable people.

Current research suggests that despite the rapid growth of online social work education, there is a widespread lack of confidence among faculty that these programs adequately prepare social work students for the challenges of direct practice after they graduate. This dissertation adds to that research by gathering detailed feedback from graduates of an online social work program about whether direct practice competencies are being met and what instructional practices have contributed to the development of their competency for direct practice.

Definition of Key Terms

Competency: A key learning outcome that is assessed for the accreditation of online social work courses and programs.

Community of Inquiry: The theoretical construct that explains how collaborative learning takes place in online education through the interaction between cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence.

Cognitive Presence: Engagement between a student and the course material that facilitates learning.

CSWE (Council on Social Work Education): The primary accrediting organization for BSW and MSW programs.

Direct Practice: Social work practice which meets CSWE competencies #6-9, encompassing a student's capacities to engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, and communities.

Distance Education: Engagement at in academic study at a geographic distance from a central site, most often through the use of digital technology.

Generalist Social Work Practice: Foundational social work knowledge, values, and skills used in a variety of settings

MSW (Master of Social Work): A 2-year full-time course of study at a program accredited by the CSWE.

Online Education: The delivery of academic content through the internet for at least 80% of course content.

Social Presence: The collaborative relationship between students that facilitates mutual learning

Social Work: A profession whose purpose is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.

Teaching Presence: The collaborative relationship between the instructor and students that facilitates learning.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online education has undergone rapid expansion in the last two decades, continuing to grow even as enrollment in campus-based learning flattens or declines. Educational leaders expect continued growth of online learning, but remain concerned about retaining students and maintaining the quality of education (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

The use of online education has helped the field of social work to recruit and prepare students to serve vulnerable and marginalized populations in a broad range of capacities (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). This work requires high levels of competence, particularly the ability to engage and collaborate with individuals and groups around complex and sensitive personal issues with people in crisis (CSWE, 2015).

While studies have shown that social work students can learn and perform just as well in online coursework as they do in classrooms (C. Cummings et al., 2013; S. Cummings et al., 2015; Wilke & Vinton, 2006; York, 2008), many leaders in the field believe that online students are not as well prepared for the demands of social work practice once they graduate (Levin et al., 2018; B. Moore, 2005). Current research on the outcomes of social work education evaluates students' work in the classroom, but not after they graduate and are using the skills they have learned.

As online social work education continues to grow, educators need to know more about how to make online instruction effective. Students (current and graduated) of an online social work program who are practicing in the community have valuable knowledge about how well an online program prepares them for social work practice.

Researchers in the field of education believe that teaching online follows the general principles of effective teaching, but also requires greater attention to social presence, or the interactivity between students and between instructors and students (Brookfield, 2006).

Social presence is essential to effective teaching, but may vary depending on the proximity between the teacher and the learner (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Some researchers believe online communication adds barriers to social presence, which may be surmounted through effective teaching strategies (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997).

The Community of Inquiry framework identifies specific areas of instruction to assess online interactions between instructors and students to ensure that learning will take place (Garrison, 2011). The findings from research on Community of Inquiry provide an interpretive framework to organize and clarify what I learned by interviewing participants in an online social work program.

This literature review discusses: (a) general background and overview of online education, (b) overview of the field of social work, (c) research on the effectiveness of online social work education, and (d) theoretical framework for a pedagogy of online education.

Background and Overview of Online Education

Online education is the latest development in what is known as distance education, which is the use of emerging technologies to educate students outside of traditional classroom settings. The history of distance education progresses from correspondence courses to radio and television to extended campuses to the modern

internet (Emmerson, 2005). Distance learning makes university education available to groups of students such as women, rural populations, and other groups that cannot access the college campus (Emmerson, 2005). Yet the limitations of technology, less engaging teaching methods, and the need for rapid, spontaneous feedback between teachers and students have raised questions about how to maintain quality instruction in online settings (Sawrikar et al., 2015).

Social work is now utilizing the internet to expand access to social work education. Online social work education meets the needs of communities by educating social workers who cannot learn in a traditional college environment because of travel and scheduling conflicts (Oulette & Westhuis, 2008).

From the Postal Service to the Internet

Distance education can be described as a method of providing education where the instructor and the learner are geographically separated, and where communication between instructor and learner occurs through print, broadcast, or digital technology rather than face-to-face interaction (Coe Regan, 2005). Distance education may be also be distinguished by the flexible use of time, which allows each student to engage asynchronously with course content according to their own schedule (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013).

Online education has three features: The location and identity of the students; the technology for interaction between student and teacher; and the educational methods used to instruct students (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). These features can be traced through five phases of the development of online education (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013).

Correspondence Schools

The development of the postal system in 19th century America ushered in the first era of distance education which was characterized by the use of correspondence schools and independent studies. The first correspondence courses in England were shorthand courses taught by Isaac Pittman in 1840, and language courses by Charles Toussaint and Gustav Langensheidt in 1856 (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). In the first correspondence course in the United States the teacher would send instructions on penmanship to students through the mail and the student would return work samples for evaluation by the instructor (Kentnor, 2015). In 1890 the Collier School of Engineering began to use courses by mail to teaching mine safety in the United States (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). In 1892 the University of Chicago offered the first university level courses by correspondence (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013).

A major advantage of correspondence schools was the opportunity to educate students who could not otherwise access university education due to distance, time, or home responsibilities. In 1873 Anna Eliot Ticknor pioneered the education of women in the United States by founding The Society to Encourage Studies at Home (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). The popularization of correspondence schools demonstrated that women wanted advanced learning and could succeed at it (Caruth & Caruth, 2013).

Since advances in mass publication and the mail system allowed instructors to simply translate classroom lectures into print form, the first era of distance education continued the traditional “instructivist” and “behaviorist” pedagogy which viewed knowledge as an objective entity transferred from teacher to student in a didactic way

(Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). Even with new technology and different student demographics, teaching remained the same.

Telecommunications

In the second era of distance education, colleges continued to deliver traditional classroom lectures to students in remote locations using the airwaves rather than the mail. The invention of radio in 1896 brought distance education into a new era, known as the telecommunications era (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). In 1919 University of Wisconsin professors began the first federally licensed educational radio station. Within a decade 176 educational institutions had broadcast licenses, offering a mix of education and entertainment programming (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). Because radio regulation was not able to adequately restrict licensing, and the airwaves became crowded with stations, which impacted the quality of the radio reception and disrupted the programming. In Latin America radio continued to be the distance education of choice because adult literacy levels were lower and postal systems less advanced (Kentnor, 2015).

In the U.S., the emergence of television replaced radio, enhancing real time broadcasts with the ability to see instructors as they lectured. However, television faced the opposite regulatory problems of radio: Restrictions on licensing made it difficult for educational institutions to broadcast their own content (Kentnor, 2015). Since the production quality was low and not as attractive as the popular programming that the public was used to, lectures were broadcast into classrooms, and students would ask questions and discuss the content afterwards with their classroom instructors (Kentnor, 2015).

Television ended up supporting classroom education instead of improving distance education.

The use of radio and television continued a pedagogical approach that was mostly one-way from instructor to learner and with little or no designed contact between learners, and less interactive than the classroom. New technology continued this “instructivist” method through film, videocassettes, audiocassettes, and eventually CD-ROM to make lectures more convenient and available. However, educational media could not match the attractiveness of well-produced entertainment on television and interest plateaued (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). The “sage on the stage” turned out to be more engaging than the sage on the screen, and lectures continued to predominate even when the technology changed.

The Digital Age

In the third era of distance education, the emergence of the internet allowed for more spontaneous interactivity between students, teachers, and course content than print or telecommunications.

The modern internet began when the Advanced Research Projects Agency in the U.S. Department of Defense began to develop the concept of computerized communication between researchers at various sites. In 1962 J. C. R. Licklider enhanced the network by contracting development out to universities and by moving to an instant and interactive mode of message delivery in a system known as ARPANET (Emmerson, 2005, p. 39.). While the first use of the internet was use to post messages and exchange information among scientists, further uses of computer messaging were explored through

a system called Usenet. In the 1980s and 1990s internet use expanded and became increasingly interactive and sophisticated (Emmerson, 2005).

The current era of distance education continues to serve students in locations remote to college campuses through new technology. However, internet technology also promises innovation in pedagogy as well, since more engaging interactions between instructors and students can occur in real time as well as asynchronously.

Into the Future

In a third generation of distance education, the emerging pedagogy of online education made full use of the interactivity of a variety of internet applications such as videoconference to promote more frequent and deeper interaction among students and between instructors and students (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). Students were able to make instant videos to present their work. Instructors could provide videotaped feedback on student assignments rather than simply writing their responses. Advances in videoconferencing allowed for the easy and convenient recording and captioning of virtual meetings so that students with scheduling conflicts and students with disabilities can still participate.

A fourth generation of distance education expanded the use of digital technology to create broader systems of learning management, such as Blackboard and Canvass, as well as creating social networks and virtual communities (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). Learning management systems, which became nearly universal in online education, provided reliable online platforms to plan, implement, and evaluate learning processes. Through the Learning Management System, instructors could assign work, share content,

facilitate student collaboration, and provide grades for assignments that are instantly viewable and track student progress towards their final grades. When an entire university or many universities employ a single Learning Management System, students do not have to learn new technology as they switch from one course to another or one university to another.

Through these innovations online education has evolved from courses to curricula with multiple forms of interaction between teachers, students, and content. An emerging fifth era of distance education may use artificial intelligence to collect data of user inputs and utilize automated responses to user inputs (Tekiner Tolu & Evans, 2013). For example, the discussion platform Packback used artificial intelligence to give students immediate feedback on grammar and writing style, even suggesting correct grammar (Chowdry, 2017). Artificial intelligence can also alert instructors to potentially controversial posts and heated discussions, relieving them of the important, but time-consuming task of monitoring every post as it is written to ensure civility.

Because of distance education, virtually any student with high speed internet may now participate in a broad range of educational offerings. Digital technology allows for many kinds of interaction, some of which are not even possible in a face-to-face classroom. For example, new technology may also reproduce or enhance face-to-face interaction through videoconferencing, screen sharing, and recording/captioning video which can be edited and commented on. In this new era, instructors may design more sophisticated kinds of interactions with students, utilizing a range of methods for delivering information, facilitating discussions, and offering feedback.

The development of distance education reveals several themes that illuminate the current use of online education: (a) Advances in technology have expanded access to more students; (b) Increased access results not only in more students, but different types of students with unique life circumstances and learning needs; and (c) New mediums of instructional delivery can change our teaching methods to make online education more interactive, allowing for great pedagogical innovation. These developments suggest that online learning will be an enduring part of the future of education once administrators' concerns about engaging and retaining students have been addressed (Garrison, 2011).

Online Education Today

In 2013 about 7.1 million students, 35% of all university students, took an online course (Allen & Seaman, 2016). This represented a 6.1% increase in online enrollment in just one year, at a time when overall student enrollment did not increase at all (Allen & Seaman, 2016). This increase is even more dramatic when compared to 1.6 million students or just 9.6% of all students taking an online class in 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

Administrators say that online education is a critical part of the long-term future of their institutions, with less than 10% saying that it is not important for their long-term future (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Fewer university administrators find online education to be inferior, with the number believing this declining from 42% in 2002 to 26% in 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

While it would seem that university leaders are fully supportive of online education, concerns about academic quality remain. The majority of leaders at

baccalaureate institutions believed that online requires more discipline to succeed in online education, a number that actually increased as online education became more widespread (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Among leaders of online institutions, 71% believed that it takes more discipline for their students to succeed in online coursework compared to face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Consequently, administrators are concerned about retention as well. The number of leaders who believed that retention is more of a concern with online education than traditional education rose from 23% to 40% in 10 years (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

Social Work

The profession of social work provides essential services to vulnerable individuals, families, groups, and communities. For this reason social work ethics highlight the importance of competency in navigating relationships (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). The uniqueness of the social work profession raises additional concerns about the use of online education to prepare future workers.

Social Work Education

Social work education is coordinated and accredited through the CSWE. The accreditation of social work programs has increasingly shifted towards competencies or outcomes, allowing greater flexibility and creativity in the methods of delivering social work education. Social work educational programs are accredited based on nine competencies:

The nine accreditation competencies are:

- 1) Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior . . .

- 2) Engage diversity and difference in practice . . .
- 3) Advance human rights and social, environmental, and economic justice . . .
- 4) Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice . . .
- 5) Engage in policy practice . . .
- 6) Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities . . .
- 7) Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities . . .
- 8) Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities . . .
- 9) Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. (CSWE, 2015, pp. 7-9)

When social work educators are asked about the effectiveness of online social work education, they may refer to these competencies (Levin et al., 2018). The last four competencies are the competencies for “direct practice,” and they have drawn the most scrutiny as researchers and faculty consider how online education is impacting the future of the social work profession. More than four out of five social workers begin their post-MSW careers working in direct practice roles (CSWE, 2020). Yet social work educators believe that online education is only “somewhat effective” at helping students to achieve these competencies (Levin et al., 2018).

Online Education in Social Work

The incorporation of competency-based accreditation allowed social work programs to participate in the expansion of online education, since accreditors like CSWE focused on student outcomes rather than the methods of the instruction (Raymond, 2005). Early adaptors of online education have been motivated by the opportunity to recruit and prepare more students for the field and to diversify the future

workforce of social work to include groups that could not be accommodated in traditional campus-centered education (Oulette & Westhuis, 2008).

There are more than 250 accredited MSW programs in the United States, and 76.4% of them offer or plan to offer online coursework (CSWE, 2015). A recent survey of more than 1,400 graduates of online MSW programs found that online students are more likely to be older and live in rural areas (CSWE, 2019). Most of them (54%) had been employed for at least 6 years before starting their MSW programs, far more than students (24%) in face-to-face MSW programs (CSWE, 2019).

Research Into Online Social Work Education

Scholars in the field of social work have continually evaluated the results of online education mostly by comparing the grades that students achieve in online courses to the grades that the students earned in similar face-to-face courses.

Comparison Studies

A meta-analysis of studies across disciplines found that students of all types perform better in online education than students in the same face-to-face classes face-to-face courses, and that results in blended learning (hybrid) are superior to strictly online (Means et al., 2009). The strong performance of online students extended to many types of students across content areas.

More than a dozen studies have been conducted to see if online social work education is as effective as face-to-face education. The most frequent approach is to compare the grades of students in an online course to the grades of students in a similar face-to-face course, also including student comments on the online course.

Online MSW students achieve comparable grades to their peers in face-to-face classes over multiple courses (C. Cummins et al., 2013; S. Cummings et al., 2015; Wilke & Vinton, 2006; York, 2008). Students in an MSW program for mental health specialization made significant and comparable progress in knowledge and skills compared to their peers in face-to-face classes (Siebert et al., 2006). Students in an online MSW mental health program who were evaluated in online simulated client interviews performed as well as students who took face-to-face classes (Wilke et al., 2016). Students in four courses in an online BSW program performed as well on assignments and earned comparable grades to students who took similar face-to-face courses (McAllister, 2013).

Faculty Perspectives

The strong performance of online social work students on assignments, tests, and course grades has not convinced all parties that online education is a viable way to prepare future social workers. A survey of U.S. social work faculty found that respondents believe that online education is less effective than face-to-face courses in helping students to meet direct practice competencies (B. Moore, 2005). Respondents thought that online courses were least effective in meeting CSWE competencies for direct practice (B. Moore, 2005).

In a more recent study, faculty across the U.S. rated online education as less effective in meeting all proficiencies and again rated online significantly lower on meeting competencies for direct practice (Levin et al., 2018). On an effectiveness scale of 0-5, Levin et al. found that social work faculty rated online education as “somewhat effective” (2.78, 2.86, 2.74, and 3.07) for the four practice competencies, while face-to-

face education was perceived as “highly effective” (4.3, 4.27, 4.21, and 4.16) for the four practice competencies. In addition, Levin et al. (2018) found that faculty perceptions of online education had not improved since B. Moore’s 2005 study. Some faculty who have taught in both formats say that in-person interaction allows for more observation and immediate feedback to students, even believing that they fail a “duty to care” when they cannot be in a classroom with students to spontaneously check comprehension and support students who have not mastered the material (Sawrikar et al., 2015).

Clinical Social Work

The MSW is the preferred educational credential for the treatment of mental disorders. There are more than 170,000 clinical, or mental health social workers in the United States, described as “the guardians of human connection,” and more than one out of four new MSW graduates work primarily in mental health settings (CSWE, 2020). The National Association of Clinical (mental health) Social Workers issued a scathing report on online MSW education, arguing that interactions with mentally fragile clients requires social work students to have intense observation, feedback, and oversight that is simply not possible in online education:

Many social workers are concerned that the relational skills and integrative knowledge essential in social work practice are difficult, if not impossible, to convey in distance education formats where there is little or no in-person dialogue between faculty and students. Social work is an essentially relational enterprise; social work education should entail this same relational quality to achieve consistency and quality. CSWA is concerned about the ability of online MSW programs to adequately monitor their students' progress in both academic and field education settings. This is particularly problematic in field internships where online education programs must quickly establish connections with field supervisors in agencies in distant communities without longstanding relationships between agencies and professional schools. (Groshong et al., 2013, para. 3)

The Clinical Social Work Association has also expressed alarm that social work field placements, a key aspect of the curriculum and the only face-to-face contact that most MSW programs will have with students, cannot be coordinated with campus instruction and cannot be adequately managed when the sites are geographically separate (Groshong et al., 2013).

Employers

One of the few surveys of supervisors in the human services field has found that potential employers of social workers have a strong preference for graduates of face-to-face programs (Curran et al., 2017). Supervisors said that social work students from online programs did not receive sufficient observation and feedback to be as skilled as their peers in face-to-face programs (Curran et al., 2017).

Students

A survey of more than 1,400 graduates of online MSW programs found that these graduates were older than graduates of face-to-face MSW programs, more likely to be females and were more often from rural areas (CSWE, 2019). Graduates of online MSW programs had more employment experience prior to their MSW education and were more likely to return to their current or prior workplace after graduation (CSWE, 2019). They had less difficulty finding jobs than graduates of face-to-face programs.

These demographics depict an online social work student body that is more experienced than students in campus-based programs. They have more extensive job histories which make them very employable and their employment prospects seem to not be negatively impacted by graduating from an online program. They also self-report to be

more likely to work directly with vulnerable populations, such as poor communities, children, elderly, and disabled populations. They are significantly more rural, so lack of access to college campuses may explain their choice of online education (CSWE, 2019).

Several studies on online social work courses asked students to rate their satisfaction with their courses and solicited open-ended feedback. These studies found that some online social work students rate their courses as high or higher than students in face-to-face courses (S. Cummings et al., 2015; Wilke & Vinton, 2006). A comparison of three similar courses in clinical social work found similar levels of student satisfaction between face-to-face and online versions of the courses (Hill, 2015). Social work students who rated their online courses positively say that access to the instructors is the most important factor in the success of their courses (McAllister, 2013; Siebert et al., 2006; Wilke & Vinton, 2006). However, when social work students rated their online courses poorly, they said that there was insufficient access to instructors (McAllister, 2013; Siebert et al., 2006).

Scholarly opinion of online MSW education is mixed, to say the least. On one hand, we know that online social work programs are attractive to students (Ouelette & Westhuis, 2008) and that students in general do just as well in online courses and like the courses just as much as face-to-face courses (Siebert et al., 2006). Yet many faculty do not believe that graduates of online MSW programs are sufficiently prepared the rigors of their complex roles in the community (Levin et al., 2018; B. Moore, 2005). Students believe that their courses are rigorous enough and highlight importance of interaction with faculty in online courses and programs (McAllister, 2013; Siebert et al., 2006).

Theoretical Orientation

Most criticism of online education is rooted in the belief that without frequent scheduled classes and the face-to-face interaction with an instructor learning becomes less engaging and more dependent on student motivation and discipline (Brookfield, 2006). Students often cite instruction as a central factor in the quality of their online education (McAllister, 2013; Siebert et al., 2006; Wilke & Vinton, 2006).

The more technology changes, the more education stays the same. When the pedagogical approach transfers the same way of teaching from the classroom to the computer, distance education may still be seen as similar to traditional education, but with lower levels of instructor interaction.

As we shift from a focus on the gee whiz factor and amusing but trivial applications, the resisters to educational change will come on side. Serious educators will recognize the potential of new and emerging communications technology and that education is about community, discourse, and reflection. There is a growing consensus that the *status quo* in the form of passive transmission of information is no longer relevant or acceptable. We are beginning to recognize that collaborative instructional designs using new and emerging communications technology are means to a more meaningful and satisfying educational experience. (Garrison, 2011, p. 131)

It is not the technology that makes online education effective or ineffective, but the thought and skill of the instructors and designers as they are informed by sound communication practices and educational theory.

Social Presence

In the field of communication theory Gunawardena (1995) analyzed the concept of social presence in various mediums of communication. The authors defined social presence in as “The degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the

consequent salience of the interpersonal interactions” (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 151).

Social presence is considered to be inherent in the communication medium itself, which may vary in intimacy and immediacy. Intimacy is associated with visual cues like physical proximity, eye contact, and smiling (Gunawardena, 1995).

Immediacy is “the psychological distance that a communicator puts between himself or herself and the object of his/her communication” (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 151). Immediacy is strongly associated with affective learning, or student satisfaction with the relationship, but the relationship between immediacy and cognitive learning is less clear (Gunawardena, 1995). Immediacy can be compromised by the medium of communication, with computer mediated communication compromising the immediacy and intimacy of direct, face-to-face communication, described as hot. Online communication is considered to compromise immediacy, making online education “warm rather than hot” (Gunawardena, 1995).

The goal of online education is to develop best strategies for online communication in order to create engaged and collaborative learning communities, warming up the interaction and compensating for the coolness of the online medium. Best instructional strategies include the enhancement of text-based communication through semantics, punctuation and paralinguistics to personalize interactions (Bentley et al., 2015).

The immediacy of social presence in online education is also described as the “transactional distance,” with communications technology functioning as a mediator of social presence that affects the immediacy of the interaction (M. Moore, 1997). Both

social presence theory and transactional distance theory suggest that the communication technology to some degree or another inhibits the immediacy of the interaction and increases psychological distance.

Social presence in online education has been enhanced by emerging digital technology that allows synchronous interactions. Synchronous online learning is defined as the real time interaction between instructors and students who are geographically separated by the use of audio and visual technology along with the instant exchange of text messages and documents (Martin et al., 2017). The technology for synchronous online learning creates a virtual, real time classroom that incorporates most of the advantages of face-to-face interaction. This possibility may significantly modify transactional distance by making interactions immediate and rendering the technology transparent once technical glitches are resolved and users become accustomed to virtual interaction (Falloon, 2007).

The technology for live interactions via videoconference emerged in the late 1990s. Research on synchronous online learning emerged around the year 2000, well after transactional distance theory had been developed (Martin et al., 2017). Subsequent research has focused on (a) effective practices in synchronous online instruction, and (b) the most effective course design to combine the advantages of synchronous and asynchronous instruction.

The use of synchronous online learning can result in high levels of student engagement, learning, and course satisfaction (Ahearn & Repman, 1994; Armstrong & Norton, 2012; Falloon, 2007; Schullo et al., 2007). Synchronous education is less

effective when instructors read from a script and when the video content is a “head and shoulders” continuous view of the instructor, but highly effective when instructors use verbal prompts, explanation, Socratic questioning, and guidance (Ahearn & Repman, 1994; Armstrong & Norton, 2012). Students find synchronous education highly effective for eliciting immediate feedback from instructors about expectations on assignments, rather than waiting for emails to be returned (Armstrong & Norton, 2012). Virtual classrooms can become rich learning environments when teachers are informal, creative, and spontaneous (Ahearn & Repman, 1994).

A combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction benefits a range of students (Giesbers et al., 2014). Asynchronous learning allows more time for students to reflect before responding, but it is also prone to misunderstandings and even conflicts between students because of the lack of contextual and nonverbal cues (Giesbers et al., 2014).

The skepticism of many social work faculty about online education reflects the basic tenets of transactional distance theory that technology, to some degree, interferes with the spontaneity and warmth that make traditional classroom education effective. Critics of online social work education may imagine online education as a “technologically enhanced version of correspondence courses with recorded lectures” (Ahearn & Repman, 1994). However, online education may also be conceived as a vast menu of instructional choices ranging from highly engaging virtual interactions to the exchange of texts and documents devoid of contextual and nonverbal enrichment (Ahearn

& Repman, 1994). It is not the online medium that makes courses effective or ineffective, but the instructional methods employed in the medium.

Constructivist Learning

Effective instruction follows sound pedagogical theory, and sound pedagogical theory suggests that students learn best in community:

Community can be said to occur in any context regardless of physical proximity, since it is based on relational as opposed to spatial dimensions. Given that individuals tend to learn best in settings where a sense of community exists, CMC [computer mediated communication] systems in education should attempt to foster online “virtual” learning communities. (Herie, 2005, p. 34)

Constructivist educational theory describes how learning occurs in community.

The primary contributors to constructivist theory are Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Lev Vygotsky.

Piaget

Jean Piaget was a Swiss educational theorist who observed child development and learning. Piaget gave children hands-on practical problems and noticed how the children applied assumptions to problems and revised assumptions based on the success or failure of their experimentation (Henson 2003). For Piaget (1964), knowledge is the ability to modify, transform, operate, or interact with an object or an idea. The development of knowledge for Piaget involved the biological development of cognitive capacities through interaction with challenges in the environment in the form of practical problems. The development of knowledge occurred through processes of assimilating new experiences into prior cognitive frameworks, or schemas, as well as accommodating and revising prior ideas to new realities (Stassen Berger, 2017).

John Dewey

John Dewey was an American psychologist, philosopher, and educator who founded an approach to thinking known as pragmatism or the focus on prediction, problem-solving, and action in day-to-day life. In *How We Think* (1910), Dewey described a process of reflective thinking through which we develop knowledge. This process begins with natural curiosity about the world. This curiosity focuses on events and objects that confound prior knowledge and beliefs, requiring skepticism of one's own beliefs while contradictions are examined. Hypotheses are formed and information gathered (investigation), resulting in revision and of prior beliefs and the development of new beliefs. The essentials of thinking are doubt and inquiry (Dewey, 1910).

Lev Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky was a Soviet psychologist who reformulated the relationship between individual development and the social world of peers and culture. Vygotsky (1978) disagreed with Piaget who said that learning was limited by the biological capacities of the developing mind. Instead, Vygotsky hypothesized a “zone of proximal development” which could be stretched by interaction with slightly more developed peers as learners of differing capacities confronted cognitive challenges together.

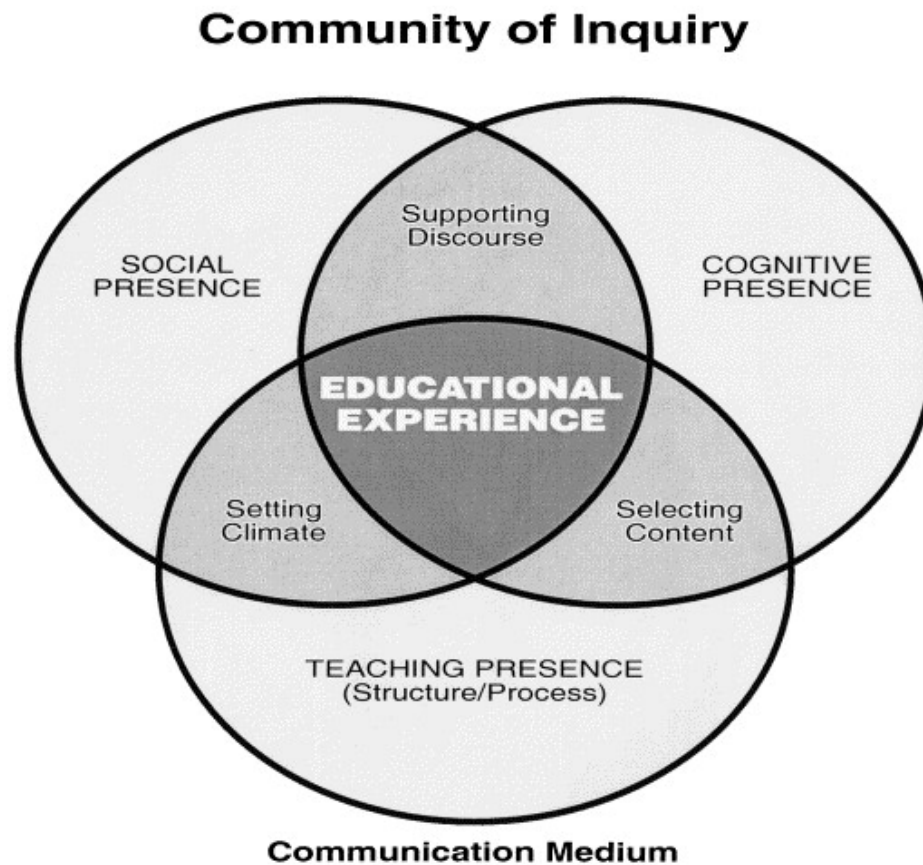
For contemporary approaches to online learning, Piaget (1964) contributed the emphasis on learning as an active, engaged process of solving dilemmas and problems, Dewey (1910) offered a model of reflective thinking, and Vygotsky (1978) described communal and collaborative (social) aspects of learning. These elements are the

philosophical basis for the primary pedagogical approach the Community of Inquiry, which is the primary pedagogical framework for online education.

Community of Inquiry

Community of Inquiry, with David Garrison as the primary researcher, has been described as the most widely researched framework for online learning (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). The seminal article on the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999) has been cited more than 5,000 times, more than any article in the history of the journal, *The Internet and Higher Education* (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

The core constructs of Community of Inquiry draw on the key concepts of constructivist learning: (a) the focus on learning as an internal process within the learner (Piaget, 1964), (b) the elaboration of a process of inquiry in order to construct meaning and knowledge (Dewey, 1910), and (c) the use of interpersonal collaboration to challenge frameworks of meaning and develop new learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Accordingly, the Community of Inquiry describes education as the interaction between cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (see Figure 1).

Figure 1*Community of Inquiry Model*

Cognitive presence is “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89). Through cognitive presence students interact with the objects of learning, challenging prior assumptions and reformulating frameworks of meaning.

Social presence is “the ability of participants in the community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves

to the other participants as ‘real people’” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89). Through social presence students are able to compare ideas, inform each other, and challenge each other.

Teaching presence is the design of the educational experience, the facilitation of interaction among participants, and the direct delivery of knowledge (Garrison et al., 1999). Teaching presence has been further delineated into 14 teacher behaviors that foster learning (Shea et al., 2006).

Cognitive Presence

David Garrison has found that face-to-face learning and online learning result in different kinds of knowledge generation. While face-to-face education is more interactive and leads to superior generation of ideas, online education results in students doing an independent search of outside sources to add to the learning environment. A key challenge for online education is fostering interactivity (Garrison, et al., 1999).

Social Presence

Garrison et al. (1999) found that “socio-emotional engagement” is essential to learning and that the lack of visual cues in a text-based online environment can undermine the conditions for learning. However, the challenges are not inherent in the online medium itself. Rather the context of communication influences the degree of social presence. Garrison et al. recommended that in online education it is imperative to establish a culture of inquiry and to cultivate nonvisual communication practices that convey immediacy, emotion, and engagement (Garrison et al., 1999).

Teaching Presence

Garrison et al. (1999) stated that “teaching presence can be created and sustained in computer-conferencing environments, despite the absence of non-verbal and paralinguistic cues” (p. 96). Garrison et al. suggested that instructors pay special attention to the pacing of materials, group size, effective techniques for moderating online groups, and using unique features of the online medium. Garrison et al. acknowledged that effective learning requires some face-to-face interaction and recommends initial face-to-face meetings and periodic videoconferencing (Garrison et al., 1999).

Critique of Community of Inquiry

The Community of Inquiry Framework is not universally embraced. It has been criticized for only being validated by student perceptions of learning, which does not necessarily indicate that deep learning actually takes place (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). Akyol et al. (2009) responded that, in keeping with the constructivist framework, Community of Inquiry is a process model, showing how learning takes place rather than a predictive model which would prove that learning would indeed take place. Furthermore, Akyol et al. maintained that since there is no validated tool for measuring deep learning, student perceptions of learning are a reasonable proxy. Finally, the predominant usage of the Community of Inquiry framework indicates widespread acceptance of the concept, which is suggestive of validity.

Durabi et al. (2011) compared four types of online discussion—structured, scaffolded, debate, and role-play—to investigate the degree to which the different discussion strategies contributed to four phases of inquiry that are associated with

cognitive presence. This study concluded that only role-plays resulted in high student engagement in all four phases of cognitive presence. Durabi et al.'s work confirms that not all online education leads to optimal learning, but also confirms that well-designed online education *can* lead to excellent learning.

Significance of Community of Inquiry

The use of the Community of Inquiry framework shifts the focus in online education from the technology, which is claimed by critics to interfere with learning by distance and distraction, to learning processes that may occur regardless of the medium of course delivery. By analyzing these learning processes researchers can determine best instructional practices as well as describe and evaluate how learning may best occur in online and face-to-face settings. Through more than two decades of research, Garrison et al. (1999) have documented that online learning can facilitate and enhance constructivist processes of inquiry, which are the best indicators that learning actually occurs.

This dissertation researched MSW student reflections on how skills for direct social work practice were learned in their online social work education and what practices best prepared them to be effective social workers. The Community of Inquiry framework provided conceptual language that was used to discuss and analyze what students reported in their responses to research questions.

Summary

Online education improves access to higher education for previously excluded groups, particularly working students and students from rural areas. Both intuition and research on social presence lead educators to believe that online education is not as

personal and effective as face-to-face learning can be, and there are enduring concerns about the appropriateness of online education for a highly relational profession like social work. While final grades and performance on assignments suggest that students are learning course material, faculty and program leaders could learn about how graduates of online social work education are doing in real world situations once they graduate.

Much of the early research on online education conceives of online spaces as essential and immutable, with inherent limits for interactivity. Yet other researchers believe that this is not necessarily so (Brookfield, 2006; Herie, 2005). The online medium may be a relatively malleable space that offer a range of possibilities with many types of interactivity. It is the pedagogical theory and its implementation, not the medium itself, that makes online education interactive and engaging. The effectiveness of online education, like face-to-face instruction, depends on the development of optimal instructional practices that can be learned from student feedback.

This dissertation inquires about the learning experiences of graduates from an online MSW as they enter their first three years of post-graduate practice. Feedback from these students addresses the following research questions: (a) How well do MSW students feel their online education has prepared them to meet the CSWE competencies for direct practice? and (b) What instructional practices in graduates' online education were most helpful in preparing them for achieving the direct practice competencies?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In this dissertation study I interviewed graduates and current students of an online MSW program to understand the experiences of online MSW education for MSW students and graduates who engage in direct social work practice in the community. This chapter describes the methodology of the study. It begins with a restatement of the research problem and the research questions. The chapter then describes characteristics of the research site and why it was selected, followed by a description of the participants. Finally, the chapter discusses the methods of data collection and analysis, researcher factors, and potential limitations of the scope of the study.

Background of the Study

Published research has often compared student performance on coursework and assignments between traditional and online formats (C. Cummings et al., 2013; S. Cummings et al., 2015; McAllister, 2013; Siebert et al., 2006; Wilke et al., 2016; Wilke & Vinton, 2006; Woerle & Quinn, 2009; York, 2008). Student comments are sometimes included in these studies (McAllister, 2013; Siebert et al., 2006; Summers et al., 2005), but systematic analysis of the student perspective on the effectiveness of online social work education for direct practice is insufficiently explored in published research.

When B. Moore (2005) and Levin et al. (2018) surveyed social work program directors and faculty across the United States, respondents believed that online social work education is insufficient to prepare students for all of the competencies required by the main accrediting body, especially the competencies that involve direct assistance

(engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation) to individual, families, and communities.

This study adds to the research in the field of online social work education by conducting and analyzing interviews with current students and graduates of an online program about their preparedness for direct practice roles. Student perspectives about their preparedness can improve the practice of online social work education and help to resolve questions about the effectiveness of online social work education.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand MSW students' perception of how their online master's programs in social work has prepared them for direct practice roles in social work settings. This dissertation gathered and analyzed the viewpoints of 11 current and graduated students who had experienced online MSW instruction and are currently engaging in direct social work practice.

The research questions were: (a) How well do MSW students feel their online education has prepared them to meet the CSWE competencies for direct practice? and (b) What instructional practices in graduates' online education were most helpful in preparing them for achieving the direct practice competencies?

To begin the research process, I developed an Initial Invite to prospective participants (Appendix A), an Informed Consent form (Appendix B), A series of demographic questions (Appendix C), and an interview protocol (Appendix D). I then sought and received human subjects approval for the study through the Institutional Research Board of Portland State University.

Research Methods

I conducted a qualitative study. Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is discovered as people encounter an activity, experience, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative studies seek to understand how people construct meaning through their engagement with a common experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative researchers want to know: (a) How people interpret their experiences, (b) How people construct their worlds, and (c) The meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The key experience investigated in this dissertation was online learning of direct practice skills in an MSW program. The design of this study asserts that those who have experienced online learning in an MSW program have a unique and valuable perspective on the effectiveness of a controversial, but emerging form of social work education for direct practice skills.

Qualitative methods were selected for this research. Qualitative research is often used when current theory does not adequately explain a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers depart from the deductive methods of inquiry that test hypotheses, and instead use inductive methods to construct frameworks of understandings, themes, and hypotheses from raw data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data gathered for this dissertation came from interviews with key informants, past and current students who are in positions where they are using direct practice skills that they have learned in the online MSW Program.

In all qualitative research the primary data are gathered through interviews, observation, and analysis of documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I felt that I could best

learn about the participants' implementation of direct practice skills with clients by talking with participants and asking questions in a way that would allow them to freely describe their educational experiences and what they learned. The information from unstructured interviews has a richness that comes from participant voice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study was a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the basic qualitative study is the most common approach in the social sciences, and is sometimes known simply as a qualitative study. In the basic qualitative study, the researcher does not adhere strictly to other more specific types of qualitative study such as phenomenological, narrative, or ethnographic, but may use elements of each.

Site

I used purposeful sampling where a researcher chooses a site and participants who can most effectively inform and develop an understanding of the experience being explored (Creswell, 2013). Participants from one MSW program, rather than multiple programs, would be able to reflect on a common curriculum and program design, yielding deeper insight, since the educational experience would be similar.

For this dissertation I elicited input from current and graduated students in an MSW program from Blossom State University, a pseudonym for a mid-sized research university located in an urban area of a state that has extensive rural areas and small towns. I chose Blossom State because it was known to me, making it a "convenience

sample.” Blossom State was also a credible site for the study because of their top 25% national ranking among all MSW programs (U.S. News & World Report, 2019).

The online MSW program at Blossom State was a new program, initiated in 2014 with startup funds from the chief academic officer for the University who wished to incentivize innovative programs for enrolling new students, especially for programs that expanded the use of learning through digital technology. The online MSW Program Blossom State began with a strong foundation due to a network of face-to-face distance sites in the state where the program was located. The leaders of the program decided to build slowly, starting with an initial cohort of 30 students, primarily located within the statewide network with accessible field placements that had previously been used in the face-to-face distance program. The initial focus of the program was to develop high-quality educational methods before expanding enrollment (Anonymous, Personal Communication, April 23, 2019).

The online MSW Program at Blossom State requires no face-to-face meetings, although attendance at an annual program meeting is recommended for all participants. The coursework took place over three years, rather than the usual 2 years for a full-time MSW program, in order to better accommodate the likelihood that students in an online program were likely to be working full-time while they matriculated as students. The MSW Program offered a foundational curriculum in generalist social work practice where students developed proficiency in all nine domains of competence outlined by the CSWE, including direct practice which is engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Like other

MSW programs, this program started with coursework oriented towards generalist practice skills and then focused on the advanced specialization. The MSW program at Blossom State was initiated with only a Policy and Leadership specialization. In its fourth year, Blossom State added the option of second specialization, in Social Work and Healthcare (Anonymous, personal communication, April 23, 2019).

Prior research on online MSW education (Levin et al., 2018; B. Moore 2005) revealed a belief among social work leaders that online social work education does not adequately prepare graduates for direct engagement, assessment, and intervention with vulnerable populations. While the online MSW program at Blossom State did not include a specialization in direct social work practice (engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities), basic direct practice skills are considered foundational in all MSW programs and were taught and assessed in both the generalist practice courses and field education at Blossom State, and in electives that the online students were able to take.

Despite the lack of a direct practice specialization at Blossom State, participants in this study had a sufficient basis to assess the teaching of basic direct practice skills in the coursework they completed. In the first year of the program they took generalist social work coursework that included some instruction in direct practice. The field placement and supervision during their second year in the program included direct practice responsibilities. Participants in the study reported that they took electives related to direct practice, including trauma-informed care, motivational interviewing, and mental

health diagnosis. In addition, many students at Blossom State were employed in direct practice roles in the community while they matriculated as students.

Recruitment

The main criteria for participation in this research study, determined by the research questions, were participation in the online MSW program at Blossom State and subsequent direct practice in communities. In my initial plan for the study I expected that only graduates of the program would meet criteria for the study. During the recruitment process I realized that many current students in the online MSW program were simultaneously employed in direct practice settings and might also have valuable insights about the relevance of their online learning to direct social work practice.

Identifying candidates to participate in this study was challenging because the available contact information for graduates of the program was either outdated or inaccessible. However, I knew a few graduates of Blossom State's program who volunteered to be initial participants and they were able to suggest more participants along with current contact information, so that I could expand the pool of participants. This method of recruitment, known as "snowball sampling," is particularly useful for reaching candidates who cannot be accessed through other methods (Salgani & Heckathorn, 2004).

In the course of my study I realized that I needed more participants and that current students could also meet the needs of the study. Since these students were working while they matriculated, they were also able to offer informed opinions on how well their education was preparing them for their current roles in direct practice

settings. I took further steps to recruit participants and included current students who were employed in paid social work practice positions utilizing direct practice skills while they were in the MSW program.

Sample

Researchers recruit participants according to factors in the inquiry itself and the types of conclusions researchers wish to reach. In purposeful sampling the recruitment goal is to find “information rich cases” rather than a generalizable sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher limits inquiry to participants who “can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience” (Etican et al., 2016, p. 2). In my study the sample included a group that could uniquely speak from experience about both online MSW education and the experience of being direct practice social workers, a kind of expertise.

I started with a sample of graduates of an online MSW program who had experience in direct practice social work after their online MSW education. I then expanded the sample to include current students of the online program who had experienced field placement and were currently engaged in direct practice employment, since they met the criteria for the study and I wanted more participants.

I started my data collection by interviewing graduates of the online program and then expanded the pool of participants to include current students who also met the key criteria for the study by having participated in field education and were using direct practice skills in paid employment. In purposeful sampling, the researcher primarily seeks information on the research question, and data collection ceases when “saturation”

is achieved, or no new data emerges (Etican et al., 2016). For the purpose of this study, I found the data collection to be sufficient when the expanded pool of participants fully addressed the various aspects of online MSW education and I concluded that useful insights were no longer emerging.

Participants

There have been three cohorts of graduates from the online MSW Program at Blossom State and three cohorts of current students when I was recruiting participants for the study. While my initial participants in the snowball sample were from the first cohort, I did not limit which cohorts would be represented in the study. This likely resulted in differing perspectives since some aspects of the program changed from year to year. Since MSW students interact primarily with other students in their own cohort, using snowball sampling alone resulted in a preponderance of students from the same cohort as my initial participants, who referred people they knew from their own classes. I had originally planned to interview only graduates from the program. During the recruitment process I realized that I needed more participants and that students who were currently in the program but had not yet graduated also met the study criteria of having experienced MSW instruction and field education, as well as being currently employed in direct practice social work. As a further way to recruit more participants, I asked a professor who currently teaches in the online MSW Program to invite current students known to that professor for participation in the study.

I communicated with candidates for the study through email and Facebook. I invited those who agreed to participate in an online interview through my institutional Zoom platform at a mutually agreed-upon time. To protect participants' identities, I asked each of them to choose a pseudonym.

Participants in this dissertation study were 11 graduates and current students of the MSW program at Blossom State. Five of the participants were located in the urban area near Blossom State, five from small towns around the state, and one out of state student from a large urban area. Five participants were from the first cohort. One participant was from the second cohort. Two participants were from the third cohort. Three participants are current students, at the end of their second or third year of the program, having experienced field education. The participants also represented a range of ethnicities. Six participants identified various forms of disability from including neurodiversity, physical pain, temporary visual impairment, and self-described "slow learner." The diversity in cohort, social identity, and geographic location served to illuminate the interplay of multiple perspectives in the program. The findings of this study would reflect that these identities did impact student experiences in the program.

Of the 11 participants in this study, 10 identified as female and 1 identified as nonbinary. This is not surprising. More than 85% of all social work students and practitioners are female (CSWE, 2019; Schilling et al., 2008). The percentage of women

in online MSW programs is even higher than in face-to-face MSW programs (CSWE, 2019). Table 1 shows the identities of the participants.

Table 1*Participant Chart*

Name	Cohort	Location	Ethnicity	Gender	GLBTQ	Disability	Employed
Kris1	1	Campus	Multiracial	F	Yes	Yes	FT
Koda2	1	Small Town	Multiracial	F	Yes	Yes	FT
Miko3	Current (6)	City	Multiracial ("passing")	F	No	Yes	FT
Violet4	3	Campus	Minority Family Members	F	No	No	FT
Jennifer5	2	City	Caucasian	F	No	No	FT
Candy6	1	Small Town	Caucasian	F	No	No	FT
Marilyn7	1	Small Town	Caucasian	F	No	No	FT/PT
Sarah8	Current	Campus	Caucasian	F	No	Yes	FT
Rachel9	1	Campus	Caucasian	Nonbinary	Yes	Yes	No
Natalie10	Current	Out of Stat/ Urban	Asian/Pacific Islander	F	No	Yes	FT/PT
Sasha11	3	Small Town	Caucasian	F	No	Yes?	FT/PT

Data Collection

I collected data from Fall 2019 to Spring 2020 through videoconferences using my institutional Zoom platform. I used recorded videoconferences for convenience and immediacy. Participants were knowledgeable of the platform from their experiences with online education and comfortable with this medium for interviewing. I transferred the recordings to my password protected account in the university's media center, with privacy settings in place. I submitted the recorded interviews for machine translation through the university media center and then copy/pasted the translations to Word

documents and corrected the translations as I watched the videos. The corrected translations became the data that I analyzed and coded.

Interview Format

I used a semi-structured format of interviewing which employed standardized questions, yet also allowed for flexibility in wording questions, depending on the participant. By using a semi-structured format, I could follow up on participant responses with clarifying questions. Semi-structured interviews like this one have a list of issues to be explored, while allowing for flexibility in the wording and timing of questions. This flexibility allowed me to respond to the comments of participants and clarify emerging ideas (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Effective questions maximize the quality of data elicited in an interview and allow the researcher to “dig deep” (Turner, 2010). The best interview questions are open-ended, neutral, and clearly worded (Turner, 2010). After brief demographic questions this study utilized a series of prepared questions (see Appendix C) according to Turner’s (2010) guidelines. Improvised follow-up questions to helped participants to be more specific in some of their comments and to further describe the instructional practices they encountered (Turner, 2010).

The research questions were: (a) How well do MSW students feel their online education has prepared them to meet the CSWE competencies for direct practice? and (b) What instructional practices in graduates’ online education were most helpful in preparing them for achieving the direct practice competencies? The first research question focused on their assessment of how well the program served interview

participants and the second question asked about the effectiveness of specific aspects of the program.

I used three sets of interview questions: Introductory, Research Question 1, and Research Questions 1 and 2. For Introductory, I asked about participants' reasons for enrolling in an online MSW program and for the program at Blossom State, as well as a basic overview of what their experience in the program was like and what kind of work they are currently doing. Specific to Research Question 1, I asked about participants' experience with synchronous education, asynchronous education, field education and experiences, and field seminars. For Research Questions 1 and 2, I asked participants several questions focused on particular educational experiences that were most helpful, what could be improved about the program, and if they wanted to add anything else that was not addressed in the previous questions.

Data Analysis

I took notes on transcripts of the interviews. I then analyzed the data in two cycles using descriptive coding in the first cycle, with axial coding and structural coding in the second cycle.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Saldaña (2016) recommended analyzing data as it is collected. I reviewed the video recordings and the machine transcription after each interview to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. Immediately after reviewing and correcting each transcription, I wrote notes which included a brief description of the participant's identity and key insights from each participant in their own words.

I conducted seven interviews until I could not identify more participants. I reviewed the notes from the first seven interviews using a descriptive coding approach. Descriptive, or topic coding summarizes data in a word or phrase. This resulted in 13 descriptive codes with 3 subcodes. I reread the transcripts, applying these codes and looking for information that did not fit these codes, and searching for possible new codes to capture data that was missed in the provisional codes. No new codes were found and all significant data were accounted for.

At this juncture I considered the sample size. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) maintain that there is no standard for sample size, but the actual size depends on the questions, the data, the results of the analysis, and sometimes the resources to continue collecting the data. Creswell (2013) associated qualitative studies with smaller sample sizes in order to attain greater depth and detail. Guba and Lincoln (1989) recommended evaluating for data saturation, or the point where no new information emerges.

I decided to engage in further recruitment from participants, mainly current students in the online MSW program, to see if further information would emerge. Applying the same codes to the final four interviews confirmed what participants said in the first seven interviews, and no new codes emerged. This suggested saturation or a point in data collection when the information becomes repetitive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Saturation of the data is an indicator that the sample size is sufficient and the researcher can cease data collection.

I coded quotes from the participant's statements and organized the quotes from participants into 13 descriptive codes. I reviewed each transcript again and applied the 13

codes as they fit the data. Finally, I copy/pasted the exact words of each participant to each code resulting in a series of insights into each of the 13 codes with 3 subcodes.

My second cycle coding combined some of the initial codes and eliminated other codes with infrequent or insignificant responses. Some codes became central or dominant codes that other codes relate to. This process is known as axial coding (Saldano, 2016). While my analysis of the interviews with participants resulted in 13 initial codes, my continued review of these codes required me to develop a scheme for how the codes related to each other, whether they were distinct or overlapping, if some codes were related to other codes, and if some data fit multiple codes. I also added codes for urban and rural participants as differences emerged in their experiences in the program. Finally, I organized the codes and the data within the codes according to the two research questions, a process known as “structural coding” (Saldano, 2016).

My analysis of the data, using both first cycle coding (descriptive codes) and then axial coding helped me to sort the data and make meaning from the data by organizing the codes. This information was organized in a way that accurately represented the participants’ insights in a way that was easy to summarize and respond to my research questions.

Researcher Role

I am an Assistant Professor of Social Practice, who has 35 years of experience as a social worker and 20 years as an instructor of undergraduate social work students. This provided me with a deep knowledge of social work practice and social work education to contextualize the information shared by participants. I also taught several online social

work classes to undergraduates and was intrigued by the possibilities that online education could provide for innovative constructivist teaching methods. I was familiar with online social work education, but did not approach the subject with a bias towards or against completely online social work education.

I was not part of Blossom State's MSW program, but had professional and personal acquaintance with Blossom State faculty, students, and social workers in the field. This offered significant professional and personal commonality with participants which served to build familiarity and trust. I clarified to participants that I was not associated with Blossom State's MSW program.

When the researcher has a relationship with the program where the study occurs there is a possibility that participants would seek to please the researcher by amplifying the positives of the MSW program and suppress opinions that might be perceived as critical of the program. I reviewed the transcripts from my interviews to confirm that the pool of participants expressed both positive and negative comments about various aspects of the MSW program. There was no indication of participant bias or selection of information to conform to perceived bias or preferences on my part. To the contrary, participants were eager to share information, and said that they volunteered to participate in order to share strong feelings that they had about their educational experiences. Their reasons for participating were to help publicize the efficacy of the program, to express unresolved feelings about the program, or to help correct problems that they had experienced in the program.

“Backyard research” can generate other problems, including role confusion by participants and colleagues (Glesne, 2016). It is possible that motives could become under question by participants for whom I might represent the program, or program leaders where are also professional colleagues. This research could uncover “dangerous knowledge” that would embarrass the program or be distrusted with dangerous knowledge by participants (Glesne, 2016). I selected a pseudonym for the university to protect the identity of the program and the participants, further preventing the research results from concerns about “dangerous knowledge.” The leaders of the online MSW program at Blossom State did not participate in the recruitment of participants for the study, nor did they ask to review or comment on the findings. This further ensured my independence and impartiality.

Limitations

Qualitative research is not intended to generalize, but to provide deep insights into particular experiences (Creswell, 2013). The results of this study do not speak to the overall effectiveness of online MSW education, but they do enhance our understanding of how well a particular program has prepared its graduates to engage directly with clients in the community and the challenges that graduates face. This knowledge can provide questions for further research and call attention to areas of improvement in the practice of online social work education.

Summary

Program leaders and faculty of social work education as well as other stakeholders give online social work education a mixed review (e.g., Levin et al., 2018;

B. Moore, 2005). While such programs continue to expand, many stakeholders continue to believe that face-to-face interaction is essential to quality social work education, especially for direct practice with individuals, families, and communities (Sawrikar et al., 2015).

Research on online social work education is still in its early stages. What is known is that online social work students do well on their classroom assignments with no apparent adverse impact from having their instruction online instead of in a face-to-face classroom. However, there is very little focused research on how students of online social work use the knowledge and skills they acquired in practice settings. These students may have important insights that can further inform our understanding what online social work education has done to prepare them for direct practice and what can be improved.

In this chapter I have outlined the ways in which I answered the research questions by carefully selecting an interview site, recruiting participants, posing questions, and analyzing responses. The methods used in my inquiry followed respected practices recommended by the research literature and included measures to protect participants from harm and assure quality control. In Chapter Four I summarize participant responses and I draw conclusions about the usefulness of online MSW education to prepare graduates for direct practice in their communities.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Online education for social work has expanded dramatically in the last two decades, along with concerns that it might not have sufficient rigor to prepare students to be competent in direct services to vulnerable populations. Researchers have noted widespread skepticism among social work faculty about academic quality, and most social work faculty in the U.S. feel that face-to-face education is more rigorous and better meets the responsibilities of faculty to be gatekeepers for the profession.

In this dissertation I conducted a basic qualitative study by interviewing 11 current students and recent graduates of an online MSW program to better understand the student perspectives on their preparation for the workforce, particularly direct services to clients and communities. I was interested the insights of graduates who are using their knowledge and skills with social work populations, and with current students who were also using their education in direct practice settings where they are now employed. I interviewed graduates of an MSW program at an urban research university referred to as Blossom State, located in a mid-sized city in the United States. The MSW Program at Blossom State offered a 3-year course of study with the advanced specialization in leadership and management. In recent years the MSW program added an advanced specialization in social work and healthcare.

The research questions that guided this study were: (a) How well do MSW students feel their online education has prepared them to meet the CSWE competencies for direct practice? and (b) What instructional practices in graduates' online education were most helpful in preparing them for achieving the direct practice competencies?

I analyzed participant responses to these questions by summarizing each interview as I reviewed transcripts from the interviews. I then developed broader categories or topics from the participant responses (category coding), coded each interview with those categories, and gathered quotes from the participants for each code. Finally, I reorganized the codes for logic and efficiency (axial coding).

In this chapter I report my findings from interviews with the 11 participants in this study. I begin with a review of how I coded and organized my findings. Then I discuss the findings from the interviews, followed by a summary connecting the findings with my research questions.

Coding Procedures

As I analyzed my notes from the interview transcripts 13 major codes emerged, along with 3 subcodes. The major codes were: (a) Peer Support, (b) Teacher Responsiveness, (c) Leadership and Management Specialization, (d) Anti-Oppressive Practice Philosophy, (e) Organizational Equity, (f) Social Diversity, (g) Field Education, (h) Field Seminars, (i) Employment After Graduation, (j) Disability Access, (k) Direct Practice Foundational Coursework, (l) Direct Practice Electives, and (m) Discussion Boards. Under “Field Education,” I found three subcodes: Field Placement Process; Field Experiences; and Field Supervision.

As I reviewed the data, I realized that some codes did not gather sufficient responses to be codes in themselves, but the data could be included in other codes. “Anti-Oppressive Practice” and “Organizational Equity” did not garner widespread comments, but participant comments could be included in the “Leadership and Management

Specialization.” “Discussion Boards” also gathered few responses and the comments on this item were included under “Teacher Responsiveness.” “Diversity” and “Disabilities” focused mostly on faculty response and were included as subcodes under “Teacher Responsiveness.”

For clarity I have organized the codes under themes as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Table of Codes

Theme	Code	Subcodes
Program Design	Program Philosophy	
	Program Specializations	Policy and Leadership
		Healthcare
	Coursework	Foundational Coursework
		Electives
	Employment After Graduation	
Teaching Practices	Teacher Responsiveness	
	Social Diversity	
	Disabilities Access	
	Discussion Boards	
Field Education	Field Education	Placement Process
		Field Experiences
		Field Instruction
Peer Support	Social Support	

Findings

The participants in this study were eager to share their experiences. They cared deeply about their careers in social work and were very invested in offering feedback that would support the program and lead to further improvements.

Four major themes emerged from the participant data: 1) Program Design; 2) Teaching Practices; 3) Field Education; and 4) Peer Support. Program Design had six

subthemes: Program Philosophy; Program Specializations; Policy and Leadership Specialization; Social Work and Healthcare Specialization; Coursework (direct practice foundational coursework and direct practice electives); and Employment After Graduation. Teaching Practices had four subthemes: Teacher Responsiveness (Engaged teaching and Inattentive faculty); Discussion Boards; Diversity; and Navigating Disabilities. Field Education had three subthemes: Choice of Field Placement; Field Experiences; and Field Supervision. Peer Support had no subthemes.

Program Design

The first major area that students commented on was the overall design of the online MSW program. The MSW program at Blossom State made a key decision to begin with only one advanced specialization, in leadership and management. As the program grew, a Social Work and Health Care specialization was added as an option. Most participants in the study for this dissertation were from earlier cohorts that could only specialize in leadership and management. Only one participant specialized in Social Work and Healthcare. Participants in this dissertation study said that choices about the overall design and structure of the online MSW program impacted their educational experience.

Program Philosophy

Participants commented on the program philosophy or emphasis on how social workers should interact with clients, communities, and organizations. The MSW Program at Blossom State was guided by a philosophy of “anti-oppressive practice,” which emphasized program accountability to service users, critique and reform of hierarchical

practices in organizations, and adopting emancipatory practices that honor the strengths of the service users and their cultures. The current and graduated students that I interviewed were excited about this content and eager to apply the concepts in practice. They found that anti-oppressive practice could be transformative for service users, but frustrating to apply in some of the organizations with which they worked.

Kris embraced the “anti-oppressive practice” perspective that she was taught in the MSW program, but could not find organizations in her community that were open to what she learned:

I couldn't lead an organization, even though that was what the specialization is like. It would've been so difficult because it was so different [from what I was taught]. I couldn't convince anybody of anything. Or I felt like I couldn't. And also, I didn't want to practice that type of work and fight people all the time on these things. The information that was presented [in class] was true and real and important, and I couldn't do it. It breaks my heart.

Kris emerged disillusioned about the practicality of social work values:

Gosh, our supervision for the first year was like literally the most depressing thing ever because people would come and [the instructor] would ask us to share about what was going on in your placement. And I would just be like, “No we didn't do that. No, I didn't get permission to do that. Nope we couldn't do that.” And that was a lot of other people, too, that said . . . that they just couldn't actualize any of the things that they were being told to do . . . It was part and parcel to why it was sort of morally injurious to deal with coursework that was too ahead of its time, I guess or I hadn't seen in many of the organizations we worked at.

Rachel thought that this disconnect was an inevitable part of the educational experience:

It's, it's academia, right, it's, it's gonna be different than your experience in the real world. I wasn't completely head in the clouds about it. Here are the ideals, this is what we want, but then this is how reality is and I think that any academic experience is going to be that way in some ways. It's an ivory tower. Just like any other institution, as much as we want to change the world for the better and be the example, that's not always the case.”

However, Sasha, a program graduate, who works in a healthcare clinic said,

Yeah, I wouldn't have what I have now, and the almost daily things that I've built into each appointment I have with somebody who is in our clinic . . . It was worth every penny. Despite the major hiccups and challenges.

While the MSW program's emphasis on anti-oppressive practice served some students well, other students found themselves in conflict with field placements who did not find that approach relevant or helpful. Students were confused and frustrated when the ideas they were taught and the assignments they were required to complete could not be implemented at their field sites.

Program Specializations

MSW programs are designed to have a first-year foundation of generalist social work practice and second year of specialized studies in a particular population, social problem, or method of practice. The generalist year is a foundation of practice theory and implementation that apply across populations, problem areas, and practice methods. This coursework centers on the nine competencies of social work practice, including the competencies for direct practice (engage, assess, intervene and evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations). In addition to the generalist practice foundational year, the online MSW Program at Blossom State initially offered only one specialization, in Policy and Leadership. The program later added a specialization in Social Work and Healthcare. Only one participant in this dissertation study matriculated through the Social Work and Healthcare specialization.

Policy and Leadership Specialization. Program participants found the policy and leadership specialization to be helpful in focusing their social work careers, but participants from rural areas realized after graduation that the narrowness of this specialization also kept them from advancing into leadership. Many of the participants in this dissertation study felt that they benefited from the from the leadership and management specialization in the online MSW program.

Koda, a student from a small town far from campus, believed that this specialization was unique and valuable in her career:

We started a trauma-informed committee in the workplace, figuring out how to navigate different power structures when different, like political structures both in the organization in the county and politics in the area. I don't feel like I would've learned that in a clinical setting, and I certainly wouldn't have learned that just going to an on-site school. I got to do those things and practice those things and integrate into that because I was in an online program doing this like on-site stuff. And those are the pieces that I wanted to learn. I wanted to learn how to do, how to navigate those barriers in our area.

Violet became excited about grassroots fundraising:

We learned about what goes into a grant application, you know, the different components, the different ways that, that can look. And we also read a really interesting book called *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*. So, it's an alternate means of getting funding your organization in your work that doesn't rely on grants and philanthropy because that's its own complex.

Jennifer, a student services specialist at a community college, felt that the Policy and Leadership specialization helped her to become an administrator:

I think a lot of what the program helped me with was really looking at what I wanted to do with my career in respect to the leadership . . . And I'm feeling more confident about myself and my abilities. But really, it's more for me learning what I need to do in order to be a good administrator because really that's what I was more focused on.

Candy enrolled in the online MSW program to be able to develop necessary resources for the children and families she had been supporting in a direct service capacity. Through the MSW program and her field placement she administered her first grant:

The Self-sufficiency Office has the DV grant . . . So, they had me write a policy for that, that sanctuary fund, which would offset the some of the additional costs that the DV wasn't going to cover. If there was funding available that is. I would help out with some fundraisers.

Sarah enjoyed the alignment of the course assignments with the work at her agency:

I appreciated that I ended up writing a grant at the same time as taking the grantwriting class. I had recently become a supervisor and then I took the supervision class. So, I think that it, it also is really helpful if you're, you're doing what you're learning.

Natalie, developed valuable leadership skills:

I'm so being able to go into those regional meetings, being able to understand the barriers within homelessness and DV, things like that. So that was what really made it fruitful. Things that I personally have never thought about or never had experience in is where is where I would say I grew the most.

Participants in this study were not able to complete some required organizational assignments because of resistance from their organizations who did not find some assignments around anti-oppressive practice to helpful or relevant. This occurred for Candy with an organizational assessment:

The one assignment that I felt like the field instructor that I had was not very supportive of is, I did an organizational assessment. There was a lot of pushback on that one, but the field instructor wanted me to do a focus group. But the employees I was working with who had to be a part of this whole thing. They were not they were not comfortable speaking about speaking out about their thoughts on the organization, unless it was an anonymous survey. So, they did not want to participate in it. So, actually the field instructor wanted me to just talk to

her about the agency and there was like a tool that I had to use and asking different questions.

For Marilyn, the resistance occurred with a racial assessment of the organization:

I actually did a racial assessment on their program during my community organization class. I don't remember which class it was, but I did a racial assessment with them, very helpful to their agency. But I think that a lot of it didn't want--they didn't really want to hear it.

While many students benefitted from the focus on policy and leadership, students from rural areas realized that career advancement in leadership sometimes requires more direct practice coursework and experience than they expected. The online MSW Program at Blossom was not designed prepare students for direct social work practice.

Koda found that in order to advance to leadership, she needed to have her license as a clinical social worker, which required her to have a job providing direct practice services, and she did not have enough preparation for her first job after graduation:

I know I didn't have a lot of it going onto my appointment after the program. I just had a little bit, just enough so that we are allowed to practice clinical work. And it was enough to get me into a clinical job. It did take me longer.

Candy also wished that she had been better prepared for a job that would help her become a licensed social worker:

You know, maybe a balance between the policy part of it, and in the counseling and therapy part of it. I feel like I would have wished I'd had more of that, because a lot of us are, we're wanting to get licensed.

Marilyn said,

I think being rural is key . . . because they need the clinical, but they also need the community practice. And, you know, I'm having to do both, especially doing my license, you know, especially with my goal of wanting to do my license, that's what I need to do.

Rachel concluded: “It is difficult to find a supervisory position in social work that doesn't require you to have your license already.”

Program graduates from rural areas and small towns had difficulties pursuing their careers without that more advanced direct practice skills. Social work clinical licensure in most states is a post-MSW process requiring direct practice experience, supervision by a licensed social worker, and completion of a licensing exam. Graduates from Blossom State in rural areas struggled to get hired for jobs that offered sufficient direct practice experience to begin the licensing process because they did not graduate with enough direct practice experience and coursework. Licensure, in rural areas, can be a prerequisite to organizational leadership because agency directors may be required to provide direct services and they may supervise direct service social workers.

Social Work and Healthcare Specialization. Natalie was in the first cohort of the online MSW program that offered a specialization in social work and healthcare. However, she was from an urban area out of state and the program did not know her location well enough to find the kind of field placement she needed. In keeping with her healthcare specialization, she wanted to work in a hospital after graduation, but that required a year of prior experience in a hospital setting. She felt that the MSW program promised her a hospital field placement, but the hospital placement suggested to her was not a good placement. A second suggested hospital placement was a 2-hour commute from her home. Instead, she accepted a closer field placement that was not in a hospital. And she still regrets it.

How am I going to get my foot in the door in a hospital? Given that I'm [working in a paid job] in home health, I do have some connections. However, one of the

things that they are holding against me is, “Okay, did you have a year of experience in a hospital setting?” is one of the questions that always comes about. I have six years in home health, but that's completely that's still different than if you're in a hospital.

Participants regarded their field placements as a bridge to future jobs and careers.

Students whose field placement were not helpful sometimes spoke of problems as an ethical lapse on the part of their MSW program.

Coursework

In MSW Programs, students take a required curriculum in both their first year of generalist social work practice, and in subsequent years for their specializations. The curriculum also includes electives which are required in the concentration, such as policy and leadership. Some of the electives are restricted to a concentration and some cross multiple concentrations. While students may take electives outside of their concentrations, they may have trouble enrolling in those courses because students from the concentrations that require those electives may have priority in registration. Also, some electives may not be taught online.

Through a sequence of generalist practice courses in the first year of their MSW program and subsequent electives, all students at Blossom State received instruction and feedback for direct services of engaging, assessing, intervening, and evaluating practice with social work populations. The students mainly took electives online in their Policy and Leadership specialization. Since Blossom State only offered the Policy and Leadership specialization for the first 3 years of the program, elective coursework in direct practice was not a planned part of the program. However, students were able to

take some direct practice electives, but found that their access to these courses was limited since many of them were only taught face-to-face.

Direct Practice Foundational Coursework. Most participants in this study had significant past and current experience with direct practice through their paid employment. Kris, who had 5 years of experience in residential treatment with youth, said that her experience in the online program included about a year of courses for working with children, families, and groups, which helped her:

We had to film ourselves and submit videos for criticism. Doing the different techniques that we were learning. And that grew me as a practitioner a lot and it was hard. I mean it was intense. Nobody likes to watch themselves on video and then critique it and then have other people critique it. So yeah, it was helpful because it was so hard, but it was hard in the right way.

Koda had worked in residential treatment with youth and families for 3 years after getting her bachelor's degree. She said that her online MSW coursework prepared her "Okay, but not well" for direct practice:

I had enough [preparation] to get the paperwork to be allowed to do the work. It prepared me to get in the door, not hurt anybody, and be able to learn. I had the roughest, a cursory understanding of diagnostics, and some of the basic interaction skills for therapy.

Sarah is a current student in the online program who has extensive experience in work with children and families. Still, after completing the generalist practice curriculum in her first year, she feels under-prepared for some direct service work that is part of her job:

I do feel like I missed out on some of like the micro pieces that if I wanted to practice clinical social work. . . . I think that if I were to become like if I were to try and work one on one with individuals. I'm prepared to do that work. But if I wanted to work one on one as like a licensed social worker, I don't know that I have the clinical skills to do so.

Direct Practice Electives. Participants talked about the importance of direct practice electives to prepare them to work with clients after graduation. Students in an online MSW program for leadership and management are permitted to take elective offerings that focus direct practice skills such as clinical diagnosis and supervision of direct practice social workers. Participants in this study found these courses very helpful. However, direct practice electives were not available enough for participants in this study.

Violet said, “I took the supervision class that was really useful in terms of having difficult conversations with people who have different views than you . . . I count that as one of the most valuable classes that I took.”

Kris and Candy talked about the usefulness of a class on motivational interviewing. Candy also found that she used a class on cognitive-behavioral therapy helpful in her daily work. Sasha talked about a summer immersion course she took in Central America so that she could be more effective in working with her Latino clients.

Miko, a current student, is excited about an elective she is currently taking about how to work with groups:

I just finished a 74 minute video about multicultural counseling with adolescents. 15 students from Tucson, Arizona. They all from diverse, gender, race, but they're all the same age and they didn't know each other. So we're just learning about group dynamics and how the two counselors are co-facilitating rather than, giving feedback to each other, but also like learning how to rely on body language or maybe calling out if there's something that they didn't like.

Candy found her electives in direct practice highly useful:

There was some emphasis on cognitive behavioral therapy, the motivational interviewing, and I've used some of those skills in my engagement because a lot of my job at child welfare and even at the Tribe is that engagement piece with families and when I was in graduate school, I did a lot of skills training with

a lot of the kids that I was working with, and so some of those techniques that I learned helped a lot with my engagement with the kids and the families.

However, Violet wanted more electives on direct practice:

I could see how a class on substance abuse could help me, but I would have rather take any working with Latinx families or some of the other electives that are offered on campus that we don't have access to.

Rachel felt that a course on supporting people with disabilities would be very helpful. Sarah suggested an elective on medical terminology for students in the healthcare specialization: “90% of the time I don't know what the doctors are saying, and I need to explain it to patients and families.”

Employment After Graduation

Eight of the 11 participants that I interviewed had already graduated with their MSW's and continued their careers as social workers. They offered important insights on how well the online MSW Program prepared them for social work practice. The three students currently in the program were concurrently employed in direct practice roles and were able to comment on how their coursework applied to their ability to help clients at their current jobs.

Most participants found that their coursework expanded their skills in direct practice, but still realized that they needed more coursework to be effective social workers and advance their careers.

Candy felt that her education helped her to be a better child welfare caseworker in tribal communities:

I feel like I've learned a lot about policy. I learned about equity as we talked about the Indian Child Welfare Act, which is something I did a lot when I worked for the Tribe. We talked about a lot of the policies that impact Native Americans. So, I feel like it did help me a lot with my job.

For Violet, the MSW credential and the excellent field education helped her to become a researcher and program evaluator:

I think [having an MSW] will help me. I think the fact that I went through this program will help me. I think the most thing the most valuable thing I found so far is my field placement work. That's sort of given me more research tools than the coursework did. That's what's giving me more opportunities to do subcontract work with programs. That's another thing I'm doing. So, I think the field placement was the most valuable.

Jennifer, who worked at a community college, realized that her field experiences with homeless populations helped her at her job:

So just the experience with my internship. I had some of the most rewarding experiences of my life as far as growing as a person. I did a year at the homeless shelter, which of the population I never had worked with before. So that was allowed me to grow and develop in them and use those skills in my current position working with me, you know, I work at a community college. We have a very diverse population. There's a lot of food and security and homelessness . . . And so being able to build my skills and really become more familiar with that population and removed from those biases of judgment that kept me from being able to advocate for them. That was something that I got out of the program.

In summary, participants in this study were excited by the Policy and Leadership Specialization and felt that they benefited from the foundational coursework and electives. They said the program was very relevant for their career goals and that they were able to advance their skills in direct social work practice. Some participants said they need more coursework in direct practice. This was particularly the case for participants from rural areas where social work practice is less specialized, and program leaders are expected to be advanced practitioners.

Teaching Practices

A second major theme in my findings was the importance of instruction. Many of the concerns about the effectiveness of online social work education center on faculty's

belief that online platforms do not provide sufficient opportunity to instruct, observe, and correct students as they strive to develop direct practice skills (Levin et al., 2018).

Participants in this dissertation study offered extensive feedback on the effectiveness of the instruction they received.

Teacher Responsiveness

The participants in this study described frequent interactions with faculty through face-to-face interactions, live videoconferencing, phone calls, and even text messaging. Professors, especially in the first cohort, assigned too much reading, which overwhelmed students.

Kris said,

The vast majority of the time they were giving us WAY too much work. It was really just like an overwhelming amount of coursework and we would just argue with the professors or try and talk about like really how much work that they were requiring.

Marilyn said, “That was one of the hardest things I’ve ever, ever done. People were getting sick and overstressed. I had PTSD for a year after, and it took me a year to come down.”

However, Marilyn said that eventually the faculty responded to student complaints and the workload improved: “It was nice because when we had our first year on campus check in, they apologized. The staff apologized. They said ‘We are so sorry.’ They had no idea because they hadn't experienced [online teaching] before.”

The experience of students in subsequent programs improved concerns about the workload of the program, and there were no complaints after the first group.

Engaged Teaching. Participants in this study felt that the engagement with faculty was a highlight of the online MSW program. Jennifer said, “I couldn’t have asked for more professional, committed, intelligent, open-minded, wonderful instructors. It was an amazing experience for me at the end of the day.”

Violet said, “I think overall [the Program] was positive. I met a lot of great people. We got to learn from folks who actually do the work in the fields in some courses.”

Videoconferencing was used strategically throughout the MSW Program. Miko said,

We use Zoom, like very heavily online. I think that's a great substitute. It's really accessible, really user friendly . . . You're reflecting on what you've read for the week. And a lot of times you'll have to invite the teaching assistant or the professor and they can interject, give me feedback on what's going well in the discussion. Or [instructor's name], she really likes to stretch you.

Koda, who lived in the same city as the campus location, described similarly frequent contact with instructors:

I've done office hours before where I go in person. And this is that this was different [than campus]. It was more personal and it was so much easier to reach out than have to like go get in your car, go to the office And it was nice to have people that were there that were available, available to help . . . There were a lot of the classes and some of the classes there was like a group of my cohort that would regularly show up during some of those kinds of office hours. And there's, like, nice discussions and support.

Jennifer also said that access to instructors was better than traditional campus-based education:

If I have a question and I need an answer and now I have told, you know, email and wait, email me. You just don't have that interaction like that face-to-face, and I didn't never I never experienced a huge lag.

Miko talked about an instructor who gave students his cell number and instructed them to text message him:

I had a problem at home field placement in the fall term. So, I just called him and then we had this discussion 30 minutes over the phone, which shows a lot about a person and how much they care as an instructor, like the fact that he would take time off from his day to like debrief with me about the problem I was having.

Natalie, a current student, talked about faculty support during the COVID-19 epidemic in the Spring of 2020:

I would say a lot of the professors have really shown up. Provided the support within the last three weeks. I must say, that's across the board with all professors, is just the professors that I've come in contact with as well as the staff, like [faculty name]. I had a concern in regards to my finances and tried to see if there is any resources that I can access. I mean, within like an hour or two on a Saturday after I emailed her, she responded telling me where I can apply or how to go about applying for a grant or things like that.

Inattentive Faculty. Nevertheless, there were occasions when students felt ignored or dismissed by faculty. Sasha described very good interactions with faculty, but was also aware that others did not share her experience:

I had some close friends whose experience did not match mine in terms of my feedback about how accessible people were. Of course, a lot of it was hearsay, but there were there was feedback, given that people were being treated very rudely, very inappropriately . . . So, I think there was some passive aggressiveness that that harmed a lot of those necessary relationships to do this type of program.

Natalie said that some faculty recycled voice-over power points and recorded lectures from previous courses instead of engaging in live interactions with students:

A lot of our classes for the online program are pre-recorded, so it seems like a lot of staff are just reusing lectures that are pre-recorded like three years ago. And some of it is very long and some of it is very dry. So, there was a lack of opportunities to learn, I would say for some students, it's very focused on your ability to be able to read articles or be able to sit there and actually listen to videos.

Discussion Boards

Online students are often required to engage in discussions through message platforms where they post and respond to instructor prompts about the course readings.

All participants in this study felt that faculty presence in discussion boards was infrequent, unless students alerted the faculty to problems that were occurring in peer discussions. Only two participants mentioned discussion boards without prompting.

When asked, most participants described discussion boards as meeting a course requirement to ensure that they were reading the course material. Violet said,

I didn't love having to do discussion posts. It seemed to me like it was more like a box you had to check off to say, "Yes, I did the reading" . . . I don't remember any of the discussion posts, but I remember some of the video conversations we had.

Sarah even found the discussion boards to be trite:

I found like a meme that said, it was something about like it was like online discussion boards for college, and it was like "Rosie says the sky is blue and then Betty says, Wow, I agree with you, the sky is blue, can you imagine that," like, and it's sometimes like you're really only responding, because you have to.

However, Koda said that the discussion posts helped her to narrow her focus on the readings to prioritize learning. She described the discussions as "lights on a runway" to give direction.

Natalie also found the discussion boards helpful:

I would say a lot of learning actually happened with the discussion boards, given that we're all at different placements on different parts of the country. So, for example, like a classmate who lives in Hawaii, seeing how her work translates into her discussion board depending on the topic of the week, things like that, so it, that's actually been helpful to kind of learn about how other people are doing it.

Diversity

Some of the most powerful and painful learning occurred through understanding social diversity from teachers and peers. Students relied heavily on faculty to provide new information and facilitate discussions, a level of attention that did not always occur.

Natalie, a BIPoC student in a current cohort said,

The teachers make the effort to correct pronouns. They make sure to make, for example, discriminatory practices, things like that, the syllabus, Things like that is going over in the beginning. I've never come in contact with a professor who, who made me feel uncomfortable. And that's my personal thing. My professors have always been very courteous and pretty conscious, I would say.

Participants who identified as White described their learning and their peer interactions around diversity as a helpful and enlightening experience. Candy described her emerging understanding of race and social policy:

It really opens up your eyes and realize that not everybody starts out at the same place and there was more emphasis on the equity than equality, because the equality is not necessarily fair but equity is. It's so kind of meeting people where they're at. And, you know, talk about Stop and Frisk, and then there we I read this wonderful book about "The New Jim Crow" and the war on drugs and how that impacted the African American population, "Stop and Frisk kind of stuff. So, I mean, that was a lot of our learning is to just kind of learn about that social justice and social work piece.

Marilyn described the interactions with diverse peers as, "Seeing things differently, doing things, especially, just coming from a rural area, it's just enlightened me, and just in my personal life."

Sasha talked about examining the impact of her own privileged identity and presumed authority in her daily work:

Almost every single appointment with people, is like recognizing that and talking about it because I didn't pass it before I didn't take a minute to say, you know, I'm White Cis-gendered identify, you know as this and practice this, I didn't take the time to honor that. But that's something I really learned from them. And, and it's proven to, you know, give me experiences that I would, I would have never had had not done this type of online program before.

However, this education about diversity and social justice took a toll on some of the participants of color.

Kris, a GLBTQ Student of Color from the first cohort, talked about the impact of confronting more privileged peers:

The emotional work especially as a person of color especially as a queer person, especially as a disabled person holding all the intersections of oppression that I do. I mean that's too much. How am I supposed to be responsible for all that? I can't even convince people not to say the word "gay" in derogatory sense. How? How? It just seems so far away. And such a struggle that I was exhausted by the program. I still am exhausted by the program.

Kris believed that students of color even left the program due to the online environment:

So, we're always talking about it and in some way and to just shift the burden onto the people that are experiencing that oppression is really challenging and why several of the people had to drop out or take a leave. I almost had to do that, but I didn't.

Koda, current student who identifies as multiracial, found herself further marginalized in peer conversations.

I think like my experience this term has been really interesting because I'm the only person that would identify as a person of color in my discussion group. And then because I don't like present as a PoC [person of color]. Like they don't feel like it's necessary. Even though I brought it up, it was just kind of like brushed away.

In the first cohort, Students of Color managed the stress by forming their own affinity group. According to Kris . . .

It was also the like one of the main reasons why people of color got together you know because we were like are you "Am I the only one that seeing all this and where the f-- is the professor? And what do we do what have we gotten ourselves into?" I mean like you know from my perspective then I was like is this going to be like the entire time like you know I can't I need like from support. So, I joined the group and that was that we were just we were just a chat group from that time on.

Marilyn, a White participant said, "There were some hard, hard feelings. There was a little bit of segregation. Oh, and I really wasn't in the middle of all that, that I felt it. The instructors were amazing to help with that."

Navigating Disabilities

Six of the 11 participants in this dissertation study identified themselves as experiencing a disability in some form, yet none of them sought or received accommodations because they were not encouraged to do so and did not think they would qualify. The disabilities included neurodiversity, speech and hearing difficulties, temporary visual loss, test anxiety, and being a “slow learner.” The students felt that they struggled at times with the instruction due to their disabilities.

Rachel did not identify a disability in the interview until she was asked.

I guess I also have several disabilities . . . I definitely wasn't encouraged to identify them or to seek out assistance would have been super great to have audio books made available to everybody . . . It would have helped me a lot, but . . . that option was not made known . . . I found out like after the fact that other people had gotten them. And I was like, “Oh, that would have really helped me.” I just didn't realize that was a thing.

The main barrier that participants with disabilities talked about was keeping up with large amounts of text-heavy learning. Sarah, who experienced temporary loss of vision during her matriculation said, “It was a mess. All of that reading was difficult, but I did it.”

Natalie, who described herself as a slow learner said,

So, I'll read, for example, an article three times before I actually kinda really grasp the understanding, and I'll have to go to office hours. Sometimes that doesn't work out with my schedule. So, there is some times where I'm just like, “What the heck is going on?”

Koda found the expectations unrealistic:

Some other books, like the chapter reading was just rubbish, they gave they gave us so much to read in a week that especially for us folks that we're not that, are neuro diverse, it was impossible to get through and consume. I can't retain 145 pages and three articles in a week. It's not going to happen.

However, Koda found online education uniquely beneficial for her as a “neurodiverse” person:

The videos were amazing and got me through the program, being able to go back and watch again and to have those pieces where I could pause and consume at my own pace, exceptionally inside, like the instructor videos. I think that's what really made the online piece work for me and the, like the weekly chat stuff.

Participants made suggestions about how the program could be more accessible for students with diverse abilities and challenges. Miko talked about the helpfulness of having transcripts for class videos. Sarah appreciated the absence of timed tests over the material. Natalie requested more videos and lectures, with less reading. Koda requested audiobooks. Rachel felt that an elective course on disabilities would be helpful.

In summary, participants in this study reported that their learning depended on the engagement of teachers, both in the classroom and in field placements. Frequent interaction between faculty and students was a positive and influential part of student learning in this online MSW program. Most faculty were highly responsive, scheduling impromptu meetings and even offering students their personal cell phone numbers. Through this interaction students received modelling and mentorship in professional behavior. Faculty facilitated essential learning about social justice, helped students resolve problems in field placements, and mediated student conflicts.

When faculty were less present, students were unsatisfied. Sensitive issues created intense conflict on unmonitored discussion boards, leaving students hurt and angry long afterwards. Faculty were not engaged in supporting students with disabilities. Disability access was generally limited to a statement on the syllabus.

Participants' emphasis on the role of teacher engagement aligns well with the role of teaching presence in Community of Inquiry theory. Students found that effective teaching presence could be attained through online MSW education, and that the level of teaching presence depended on the commitment and skill of the instructor. Teaching presence was not limited by the online teaching modality itself because field education, videoconferencing, emails, phone calls, and even text messaging made instructors remarkably available for feedback.

Field Education

A third major theme in the participant interviews was field education. Field education is described by the CSWE (2015) as "the signature pedagogy of social work education" (p. 12). Accordingly, all MSW student are required to complete 960 hours of field education over two years on the MSW Program. For online social work education, field education is the place where the students get have their most immediate, spontaneous, and direct contact with faculty, professionals in the field, and clients. In field education MSW students can be observed and evaluated, and receive formative feedback to further develop their skills for direct practice and for leadership.

At Blossom State students take foundational academic curriculum entirely for their first year, a generalist field placement in their second year, and a field placement in their area of specialization for their third year. Field placements take place in the student's home community and are supervised by an experienced MSW supervisor on site. If the onsite supervisor does not have an MSW, then the student receives additional supervision from an MSW who does not work at the agency. MSW students also

participate in a weekly group seminar to discuss and debrief field experiences, and to identify emerging issues.

The MSW program policy at Blossom State is for field specialists to facilitate the selection of field site for each student. Since most of the MSW students in the online program at Blossom State are already working in the social service field, many choose to do their field placement at the agency where they are employed, with distinct responsibilities for the field placement and their paid employment.

All participants in this study except for one were employed in the social service field while they were in the MSW program and most of them worked full-time while in their field placement and taking classes. They described powerful learning experiences, but many felt confused and frustrated with the way their placements were selected. This difficulty was particularly acute for students who lived outside of the campus area. Many of the more remote areas were new to the MSW program and field faculty were scrambling to find new placements that would fit student needs.

Field education played an important role the development of skills for both direct practice and organizational leadership since they could receive immediate feedback and guidance from their field instructors.

Marilyn found the field work to be both difficult and fulfilling:

It was a BIG challenge for me mostly because that was not where I wanted to go. It was so informative in that direction . . . I loved the community work, but the leadership was not my forte. And so, it was a real challenge for me and I had to REALLY get out of my comfort zone . . . It was a good thing.

However, students from rural areas an out of state felt unsupported by field faculty who, they were told, would arrange a good field placement for them. The

challenges of finding a placement affected Natalie's impression of her entire education at

Blossom State:

Would I recommend a classmate or a friend of mine from my area to apply for [Blossom State]? No. I wouldn't, to be honest. I would say no. If you were in [the area near the campus], I would say, yes. Apply for it because access to a lot of the internships are there . . . because the accessibility. But if you're out of state I'd say I would really question if you would really want to apply for [Blossom State] just because you have to do a lot of the legwork yourself when you're getting internships.

Students expressed mostly positive feelings about the field placements. Violet said,

I think the most thing the most valuable thing I found so far is my advanced placement. That's sort of given me more research tools than the coursework did. That's what's giving me more opportunities to do subcontract work with programs.

For Marilyn, "It was amazing. They welcomed me with open arms."

Even though she had trouble finding a job because of not getting a hospital placement, Natalie said that the field placement she ended up with still offered valuable experience:

So, for my second year, I'm grateful in a sense that my internship is great. The people that work there are great . . . My internship was very supportive of the people that I worked with, my supervisors, and I wouldn't trade that for anything. I still keep in contact with them.

Choice of Field Placement

Students, particularly those who were further from the campus area, felt unsupported in establishing an appropriate field placement.

Koda, who lived in a small town that was hours away from campus, expressed her disappointment:

The field education was rough. . . . But it was hard because we didn't have any established sites in my area and so, they weren't able to find any. So, I kind of had to go find my own . . . My preference would be that more time and effort would have been committed to having somebody who did outreach and like groundwork to create established internship sites and create a better connection and better network sites . . . I know they do that up in [the city where the campus was located]. And they do that in these bigger hubs more than here in the different rural areas. I kept hearing that from my other rural folks that we felt like we were having to do it ourselves while we were learning. And that was rough.

Jennifer, also from a small town felt that she had to take matters into their own hands despite being told by field faculty to wait for them to make the placement:

I knew I needed an internship and so that's why I reached out to [mentor] and just shot an email, a personal email to him and said, "Hey, this is what's going on and beyond. I could really use this internship." And when that happened, [the field faculty] was like, "Oh, that's great, but, you know, you're not supposed to do that, but I'm glad you did." Kinda bad because I don't know. I don't know what would've happened if I wasn't able to if I didn't pick up, it would have been something that I might not have grown as much from it as I did.

Rachel spoke of the contradictory messages about finding a field placement and a lack of coordination in developing the placement:

You're like, they basically barred us from doing that ourselves, which would have allowed many of us to obtain paid internships, not allowing people to internship with their current jobs. You know, it's just one more barrier to finishing that was not necessary.

After considerable delay, Rachel ended up finding her own field placement:

But then a lot of folks got to the point, I think it's like March or something where they're like, this is when you, you know, know what your internship is, then they didn't have internships and then the School was like, "Oh yeah, you live out of the area you have to figure out what your internship is yourself," instead of like making that determination, you know, back in September. I think that that process was less fleshed out than I hope it is now.

Natalie, from a large urban area out of state, was in the first cohort that offered a social work and healthcare specialization and need to have a hospital field placement so that after graduation she would have the required experience to be hired as a hospital

social worker. After two suggested hospital placements did not work out, Natalie felt she had to take a non-medical field placement. Despite having a very good experience at the placement itself, she felt that the lack of hospital experience would be a major barrier to her becoming a hospital social worker, as she had planned:

However, there's a part of me that does not feel fulfilled in the MSW program just because I wasn't able to flourish or gain more knowledge within the healthcare concentration and those classes that I would have been taking . . . I feel like a lot of us feel like there was a lack of transparency and too much, (how would I say it?), too much promise that was given to new incoming students. Like our first year was great. All my classmates seemed to have loved the program as a second and third year kinda progressed, there is like some negative feelings going on due to the lack of transparency [about field placements].

Sasha reported another student's struggle with finding a field placement:

I have a friend that was in the very first cohort, and there was pretty much nothing done by the liaison that had to seal the deal, not even being accessible, which I find was . . . malfeasance in a way, if I was to use medical terminology. I felt it was very harmful and damaged relationships greatly and, I'm sorry, but I felt that that's something that really should be changed.

Field Experiences

Despite the lack of support in obtaining their field placements, students reported positive and even transformative learning when they found solid placements. Jennifer said, "I got to work with an amazing population that I would never have had the opportunity to work with, with. I probably never would have stepped up by my comfort zone if it wasn't for the program."

Miko, who organized public transit riders, became excited about community organizing through her field placement:

You actually have to go meet with stakeholders like out in the community or partners within your coalition. And that's stretching me because when I worked in a micro level, it was more about touching base with colleagues that my organization and not really like reaching out because now it's more movement

work. It's not what I think of traditional social work like case management, like counseling or therapy, like its movement like you're wanting to build something that's going to last beyond your years and people want to remember you for it.

Violet was able to advance her career as a researcher and program evaluator:

I was doing qualitative data analysis and writing reports and actually doing sort of the research work that I like to do. And so, I was really able to build skills as a qualitative researcher so that I can sort of market those skills and get work.

Jennifer talked about changing her own attitudes in her first field placement by interacting with homeless people, with whom she had no prior experience:

And, and so by interacting and doing some case management with population and I wrote some curriculum for like a group and being able to lead that group. I met one of the most tremendously wonderful people then and recognized there's, there's different types of homelessness, right? And so, having an understanding about the different types of homelessness, and then being able to, to communicate that to people who judge them. . . . I never would have had that if I hadn't had that experience with that program.

Jennifer talked learning leadership in her second-year field placement by shadowing her field supervisor who was merging two substance use recovery organizations:

He allowed me to shadow him for a year, which was with huge for me as far as learning how to lead different, different groups. . . . And I was able to watch how to navigate that and how the complex conversations and bringing in a new organization and bringing all these rules and, you know, all these different things that much different than a non-profit. So that just, that taught me how to have adult conversation and be the leader.

Marilyn found her field placement to be her favorite part of the MSW experience: “Thing about it I loved. . . . The staff was very well-prepared, very prepared for always having something for me to do. I think that they just were they were they were seasoned.”

Sarah discovered the power of policy advocacy:

And so I got to join a policy committee, I got to bring folks up to [the state capitol], and that was a really awesome experience . . . I just brought these two

individuals to go and talk about their experiences and what they need and the representatives ended up saying at the end, “The state of child care and the state of mental health resources must be dire if I have parents coming to talk to me.” It was really awesome that I was able to facilitate getting them up there and getting their voices heard. That's been a pretty awesome experience.

Sasha felt that she was making difference in the opioid crisis in her community:

And so one thing I've been able to do is do a bit of a research study so to speak on our medication assistant, medication assisted treatment program for persons who have chronic pain primary diagnosis and substance use disorder secondary diagnoses and, and having them give feedback and then me present the findings really kind of more qualitative reports from the people that participated and what things they really liked about the program and what they felt needed to change and some of those have actually changed during the last year and a half.

Even Natalie, who was not able to get the hospital field placement that was needed for her career path, found value in a different kind of work in a domestic violence shelter:

I learned a lot during my internship, so I also opened the doors for different opportunities. And so, for example, one of the things that has been on my mind is DV and homelessness, but also access to, for example, start testing for sexual assault survivors. How does that play out in a hospital setting? So, for example, there is a hospital that we, two hospitals that are agency really works with and kind of seeing how the treatment of survivors are in a hospital setting, and how can that be addressed? . . . How do you provide more trauma-informed care and hospitals for survivors? So, I blended a lot, and I can see how that can translate into a hospital setting . . . So, there was still a lot of learning.

Not all field placements supported students well. Two participants felt a disconnect from the social work practice described in their coursework and what they experienced in their field placements. Some field placements were disinterested or unprepared to host social work students.

Rachel felt like she was on her own:

I feel like I was largely unsuccessful in creating my own experience, you know, they basically were, you know, this is the job that you know a person who works here would do . . . They gave me a binder, you know, a big binder and they're

like, here are the program requirements and rules and regulations and here's how the funding works, but they didn't actually like take time to train me, you know, or explain, you know, how, really how to do things.

Field Supervision

Some of the most powerful teaching in the online MSW program occurred through weekly on-site field supervision. Violet received ongoing attention from her supervisor:

She was really available for me whenever if I had a question . . . We were located at the same site, like only steps away from each other. So, if I had a question or if I need a clarification, you could set up a meeting or I could just go over to our desk and ask a question. She gave me a lot of opportunities to try out different kinds of different projects. . . . You know, if I was if I was struggling with how to plan for a youth, we could sit down and really talk about it. “Why don't we try this? Or why don't we? Or here's a little bit of insight about this use now what can we do to plan for them better?”

Candy's supervisor taught her about advocacy for children impacted by domestic violence:

I felt really very supported and encouraged in my placement. I felt like I had some really good people I was working with, who are willing to kind of mentor me and show me the ropes and kind of encouraged me to watch, learn about the Duluth model, and learn how to do assessments and then branch me out in the community.

Sarah's off-site field supervisor introduced her to the key professionals in their small town:

I worked with her at the hospital and, and then I also have worked with her in the community. She's a supervisor over at CPS and now she's the behavioral health director at one of our local clinics and because we, it seems like a really small town to me, and we know most people and that has benefited me, at least in that I get a different perspective. And I get to just network with other folks.

Natalie found support from a colleague at her agency who was not her supervisor:

And the individual who is overseeing the DV program, she was she's very supportive even though she is not really my supervisor, she was also very

committed to my education and learning about the program. So, she actually will make sure I got the emails. I got the . . . I received the email blast, things like that. So, it was learning not only within my supervisor as well as my internship at the other organizations that were contracted with were also supporting my learning experience.

In summary, field education was a pivotal experience in this online MSW program. For many participants, the field work and accompanying supervision offered valuable and transformative experiences that influenced their careers afterwards. But the process of establishing those placements was confusing and frustrating, leaving many participants feeling neglected and even misled. Some of the field placements that were established were a poor match for the student needs, which left students feeling like they fulfilled a requirement without actually learning. Other field placements were unreceptive to the values of advocacy, equity, and empowerment that students were being taught in their coursework.

It is important to recognize that even in an online MSW program, the experience of field education is similar to what students in face-to-face programs receive. In these field placements online students meet face-to-face in real time with experienced social workers who supervise them. Online students have the same opportunities as other students to gain valuable experience working with social work clients in social service settings. The learning in these settings may be as effective for online MSW students as it is for students who engage in face-to-face education.

The challenges that participants in this study encountered are not specific to online programs, either. With burgeoning classes of social work students, educational programs often struggle to arrange and manage effective field placements, even when the programs are face-to-face. Field placements arranged too far in advance end up being

cancelled due to intervening circumstances such as the assigned supervisor leaving the organization, or budget cuts rearranging or eliminating workloads that had been designated for social work interns. Agency personnel may encounter excessive workloads, leaving them less time to supervise students than they had intended. The students they are assigned may not be experienced or skilled enough to handle the work that had been planned for them. The criticisms of field education specific to online education that were discussed by these participants had to do with the unique challenge of designing placements in remote sites that the field education coordinators were not familiar with.

Peer Support

A fourth major area of comment by participants in this dissertation was support from their peers. Learning is a social process—a way that students compare backgrounds, share impressions, and discover how to navigate coursework and technology in an online environment. An online MSW program can expand student interaction beyond the boundaries of the classroom to develop a student culture of 24-hour peer support.

Participants in this study frequently commented on the importance of peer contact during their online education, often through videochats, social media, texts, and phone calls. Some of the relationships began with a required face-to-face program meeting at the beginning of the program. Natalie said,

I personally liked the required meeting. I forgot what they call it, but before we start the term, I actually had to fly out to [campus] both my first, second year, um and I think that was very helpful. Being able to meet my classmates face-to-face, being able to engage with them. My first year, the individuals that I actually sat with at that table, there was three of us. We have actually grown a bond and

become friends and been able to support another throughout the last three years, as well as other students.

Natalie said that she sometimes did not understand the material, but would text or videochat with students she met, even to the point where she felt the program was “self-learning with peers.”

Most of the peer interaction was social and emotional support, which built relationships that continued after graduation. Sasha found these relationships indispensable:

Those developed into people that I would rely on. If I wanted to pluck my last eyelash out or, or something. They became those people that I wanted to get together with during breaks, because you, people may not think you get to know somebody online, but you really do.

Sasha even compared the peer contact favorably to her prior experiences in face-to-face education:

I think actually got to learn my peers, more so than some of my friends who did campus type programs. My, some of my colleagues before me, who did campus type programs, they, they just didn't get that richness and I'm not, I'm not sure why we never really talked about that. But they said, “Oh man, I never hung out with anybody outside of school,” but I felt I did and I still do.

Similar to contact with instructors and course materials, online MSW education dissolves some of the boundaries of face-to-face education, making it more interactive, not less, as some social work faculty believe. Kris said, “I was online All. The. Time.”

The students and graduates confirmed the importance of what Community of Inquiry calls social presence, or peer to peer learning. They described extensive support from fellow students as they managed the rigors of the program. They also described way that fellow students would help them to understand expectations and navigate the technology used in the program.

Summary

The first research question for this dissertation was: How well do MSW students and graduates feel their online education has prepared them to meet the CSWE competencies for direct practice? The participants in the study said that they had indeed advanced their skills for direct practice, but, for some, not as much as they needed. The major concerns were the program design, which led them to focus too narrowly on policy and leadership. Participants felt that they needed more opportunities, in both required courses and electives, to further develop the direct practice skills that they would later need to advance their careers. The need for more preparation for direct practice was particularly acute in rural areas where social worker leaders are expected to be licensed, which requires prior experience in direct social work practice. Some graduates of the online MSW program at Blossom State did not feel sufficiently prepared for direct practice in their first jobs, and struggled to get the needed employment experiences after graduation.

The second research question for this dissertation was: What instructional practices in graduates' online education were most helpful in preparing them for serving people in need? Participants described a wide range of successful instructional practices, including videoconferencing and regular, informal contact with faculty. Participants believed that the success of the program was due to the commitment of faculty to design and prepare their courses, and to be available to respond to students' questions. Participants in the first year of the program said that they were overwhelmed and stressed

by excessive reading and other assignments. Yet, they also said that faculty welcomed their feedback and changed the courses accordingly.

Field education at Blossom State often provided rich and valuable learning for participants in this study. Students had important experiences that helped them develop social work skills. Field supervisors were effective mentors and coaches. However, strong field placements were often difficult to arrange, especially for students in rural areas. While students were told that specialized field faculty would facilitate placements, the faculty support was inadequate, resulting in delays and student distress as placements were established. When the placements were not developing, students even took charge of finding their own placements against the instructions of field faculty.

The students and graduates I interviewed said they did not learn alone. Peers helped them navigate assignments, solve technology problems, and manage the stresses of the program. Participants said that these interactions helped them persist in the program despite the stresses of online learning, and they formed enduring friendships in the process.

Participants also offered important insights not anticipated in the research questions for this study. Many of the participants said that their learning was impacted by disabilities. They did not report these disabilities to faculty or the Disabilities Resource Center because they were not invited to self-identify and they thought they would not qualify for accommodations if they did report their difficulties.

The program was particularly stressful for students from underrepresented groups. They sometimes encountered uninformed and prejudicial comments from other students,

especially in poorly monitored discussion forums. Without faculty intervention, students from underrepresented groups felt that they had to bear excessive responsibilities to correct and educate their peers. However, faculty were usually knowledgeable and modelled appropriate values, intervening on student microaggressions that they were aware of.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

I began researching and writing this dissertation in 2016, concluding my interviews in the Spring of 2020. As I began analyzing these interviews, higher education was rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which all but eliminated face-to-face university education immediately. Remote learning, or teaching existing courses face-to-face through videoconference technology, became nearly universal. As a result, tens of thousands of social work students completed their education without entering a classroom, a prospect that many social work educators thought would leave them inadequately prepared for working directly with clients (Levin et al., 2018; B. Moore, 2005).

The participants that I interviewed for this dissertation described a very different experience, and expressed that online learning, when implemented with care and expertise, can offer ample opportunities to build critical social work skills. We do not know what social work education will look like after the pandemic has eased, but in the current crisis new possibilities have emerged, and the advantages of online education may attract more interest.

For this dissertation I designed a basic qualitative research study where I interviewed 11 current and graduated students of an online MSW program so that I could have a deeper understanding of what they learned from their online education and what educational methods were employed. I needed to know how they fared in their direct practice responsibilities (engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation with individuals, families, groups, and communities) after their coursework.

The participants in this study eagerly shared their insights about the benefits and frustrations of their online MSW educational experience. Their comments are like the lights of a distant airport, guiding the plane of research to preferred runways and more accurate conclusions about the value of online social work education.

Implications

In this chapter I discuss implications for practice and research on online social work education especially to prepare students for direct practice roles. Specifically, I discuss the implications for social work education, including program design, instructional practices, and vulnerable students, then concluding with implications for further research.

Implications for Social Work Education

The main challenges in Blossom State's MSW program were in the "program/course design" aspects of teaching presence, which did not provide as much direct practice content as the participants needed after they graduated, or did not sufficiently allow the complexities of arranging and coordinating field placements at remote sites.

Implications for Online Program Design

The Blossom State MSW Program was designed with one specialization, in Policy and Leadership, but did not recognize that in rural communities, leadership positions would also require program graduates to have advanced direct practice knowledge and experience so that they could become licensed and then qualify to be program leaders. Online MSW programs are likely to serve diverse students from many

different interests, identities, and locations. Narrow specializations may leave some students under-prepared for the demands of social work practice in their own communities. Koda said, “The program prepared me enough [for direct social work practice] to get in the door, not hurt anyone, and to learn.

MSW graduates may start out in direct practice positions, no matter what specialization they choose. Advanced foundational coursework and electives in direct practice should be available for all online students. Online programs may better serve students by offering an advanced generalist approach with multiple electives rather than one specialization with a narrower range of electives.

Implications for Instructional Practices

Community of Inquiry theory proposes that excellent learning occurs online through engagement with course content, peer interactions, and relationships with teachers (Garrison, 2011). Participants in my dissertation study described at length how engagement with course material, teachers, and peers supported their learning and helped them to become better social workers. The successful practices of the MSW Program at Blossom State evoke many aspects of Community of Inquiry.

Despite the ubiquity of Community of Inquiry in the research literature, it is seldom discussed in the scholarship of social work education (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). Only one article in the social work literature focuses on Community of Inquiry (Bentley et al., 2015). Further dissemination of research on the theory and practice of online education, including Community of Inquiry, will help social work educators to better understand how to use the interactivity of online education to further utilize constructivist

methods and become better teachers. This information needs to be published in the periodicals that social work educators are likely to read.

According to the Community of Inquiry, successful online education requires the skillful interplay of student interaction with the course content (cognitive presence), with teachers (teaching presence), and with other students (social presence; Garrison et al., 1999). Participants in this dissertation study commented on each of these areas—cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence.

Cognitive Presence. The central purpose of education is for successful student interaction with course content (Garrison et al., 1999). Faculty need to be aware of the tendency to compensate for the lack of “seat time” in online courses by adding additional reading. Online education does not require more material, just different ways of learning the same material.

In course design, faculty should account for the likelihood that, unlike campus-based students, online MSW students are working full-time jobs in social services while they are studying. These rich experiences can make for more vigorous student reflection and learning without adding assignments and readings to the campus-based versions of the same class.

Marilyn described the online MSW Program at Blossom State as an intense and fulfilling experience, even to the point of exhaustion. Miko read her texts by listening to audio versions in the car, as she commuted to work after hours of caring for a brother with disabilities. Kris said, “I was online All. The. Time.”

Despite the intentions of faculty, completion of all of the assigned readings was, for some students, simply not possible. This was particularly hard on students with disabilities and students with busy family and work schedules. Faculty need to trust that students are learning just as well with less seat time because the students are spending more time interacting with the same material in other ways.

Teaching Presence. Participants in this dissertation study said they learned the same content for social work practice they would have learned in a face-to-face program, but they learned in new ways through different methods of communication from teachers such as recorded lectures, planned and spontaneous videoconferences, group projects, and virtual roleplays. Faculty need to make teaching presence (Garrison, 2011) available in a variety of formats to interact with students according to student needs and schedules.

The online MSW students at Blossom State appreciated the responsiveness and flexibility of their faculty, and instructors in other online MSW programs can learn from this. Because online MSW students are likely to be working fulltime during the week and doing their coursework in the evenings and on weekends, instructors need to be available to students outside of normal working hours. Due to busy schedules, students need quick responses from instructors, so they can complete one assignment and move to the next without delay.

Social Presence. Faculty need to create spaces for social presence (Garrison, 2011) where students can learn from each other. This includes collaborative projects, chatrooms, and moderated online discussion forums.

Social work students can develop skills for critical reflection through online discussion boards (Testa & Egan, 2016). Despite the promise of thoughtful, sustained reflection, asynchronous discussions can become tedious tasks without careful direction. Violet said, “To me, it was more of a box I had to check off to say, ‘Yes, I did the reading.’”

MSW programs need to assess their use of online discussion boards, and instructors need to guide these discussions with questions that invite incisive response rather than summaries and banalities. It would be helpful for MSW programs to review the research and train faculty in successful practices to support online discussion boards (Levine, 2007).

Implications for Diversity

With the focus on rapid adaptation of curriculum to new technologies serving more students in new ways, my interviews for this dissertation highlighted the importance of attending to vulnerable populations.

Disabilities

Responding to the unique needs of students with disabilities is an emerging and important issue in online education. Josteen and Cusatis (2020) found that students with disabilities scored significantly lower on key aspects of online learning readiness compared with other students, concluding, “Further research is needed to explore underrepresented students’ readiness for online learning” (Josteen & Cusatis, 2020, p. 190).

Five of 11 participants in my study said they had some form of disability. Yet none of them identified themselves as disabled during the course of their MSW program and none of them received accommodation. Beyond boilerplate syllabus statements, disabilities were not talked about in the online MSW program at Blossom State, leaving some students to push Sisyphian boulders up formidable hills on their own.

Koda described herself as neurodiverse and unable to struggle through the dozens of articles and texts that were assigned in her courses. “[Accommodations] would have really helped me, but I didn’t know it was a thing (Rachel).” Jennifer fell behind in assignments for two weeks because of a failed eye surgery that left her unable to read.

Online MSW programs need to be prepared to meet the needs of students like Jennifer, Rachel, and Koda. Students may not respond to syllabus statements about their rights because they do not identify themselves as disabled or do not know that their challenges qualify them for accommodations. Instructors and programs need to be alert to the signs of student distress and academic challenge so they can further identify how to help.

Future research should find out more about the prevalence of disabilities among online MSW students and the impact of disability on their learning experiences, so that educators can develop more effective practices for identifying and accommodating these students.

Diverse Backgrounds and Identities

In online education students learn from each other through social presence (Garrison, 2011). While peer learning is valuable, unguided peer interactions on powerful

topics can become counter-productive and even injurious. Without expert faculty facilitation, students from underrepresented groups may feel burdened by the need to respond to microaggressions and misinformation.

In the first MSW cohort at Blossom State, online discussions on topics of race and gender/sexual identity became volatile. Students from dominant identities described their experiences around diversity as helpful and enlightening, while students from underrepresented groups were frustrated to the point of wanting to leave the program. In one cohort, students from underrepresented identities even formed their own affinity group to process the stress of fending off micro-aggressions, mostly in poorly monitored discussion boards. Kris said to her peers, “Am I the only one seeing this, and where the fuck is the professor?”

Faculty development around diversity, equity and inclusion is essential for instructors in social work programs. The primary role of faculty should be to intervene on oppressive attitudes and behaviors, and to model self-awareness and sensitivity in all learning forums so that students from marginalized backgrounds do not feel the responsibility to disrupt conversations and educate their peers. This requires additional training as students are interacting with each other in new ways outside of the university classroom.

Implications for Field Education

Field education provides the most intensive opportunity to observe and guide social work students in their direct practice skills. Groshong et al. (2013) have the belief

that quality field education is more difficult to establish and integrate with the school curriculum at distance sites.

Given the ubiquitous difficulties experienced by conventional MSW programs in developing and maintaining quality internships in their home communities, quality control of field experiences is invariably impacted when an online MSW program has to establish new placements in distant communities for many, if not most, enrolling students. (Groshong, 2013, Field Internships, para. 4)

Field education was, for participants in this dissertation study, the highlight of their education. Jennifer said, “[Internship] was one of the most important experiences of my life, in terms of growing as a person.” However, complications in establishing new field placements and poor communication with students led to delays, stress, and unmet student needs. Some students interviewed for this dissertation said that they were prohibited from finding their own field placements, yet faculty did not follow through with their promises to find placements for them, either.

Establishing strong field sites for online programs will likely take more time and resources than program administrators might expect. Field sites need to be adequately attuned to the program philosophy and the field related assignments that students need to complete. When online students know more about the organizations in their area than the field faculty in their online programs, collaboration between faculty and students in the design of field placements is essential. Online MSW programs should take place over three years, allowing for a full year to collaborate with students to establish sound field placements before the placements occur.

In the Fall of 2020, a listserv for leaders of BSW programs received a flurry of responses and opinions when a faculty in a campus-based program reported that students in his community were asking him for suggestions for field placements in their online

programs at other institutions (Bachman, 2020). The ensuing conversation revealed a lack of a clear accreditation policy on the role and responsibility of social work programs in initiating field placements.

Indeed, the CSWE specifies the standards for field placements, screening criteria, oversight, and communication, but does not address the question of who initiates and establishes the field placement (CSWE, 2015). Without expert field faculty who collaborate with students from the outset of the placement process, hasty placements can undermine the value of a student's education. Expecting students to arrange their own placements is may be unfair to students. The lack of guidance from CSWE on this critical issue appears to allow universities to play no role at all.

Further research is needed on how online MSW programs are establishing field placements for their students, what best practices have been developed, and what role MSW programs should have in establishing these placements. There should be better collaboration between online programs to help their respective students to find the most suitable field placements near their home communities.

Implications for Research

This dissertation was a "basic qualitative study" into online education through the experiences of students who experienced an online MSW program and applied their learning in social work practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Future research of this type needs to be conducted at other teaching sites to further explore the themes that have emerged in this study.

The findings of this dissertation suggest further lines of inquiry in theory and practice. From this study I have learned that current and graduated social work students have a unique and powerful perspective on their education. In future research, it is particularly important to talk with graduates of online programs who can discuss how their online education has impacted their practice and their careers after graduation.

The research site for this dissertation was one small program at a mid-sized public university. We need to know how students experience larger online programs and programs at private universities. We also need to examine the student experience through other forms of data such as surveys of students, interviews with program leaders, and accreditation visits. Once successful programs can be identified through student voice, best practices need to be disseminated to other programs.

The findings from this dissertation should be compared with what we know from the student experience of face-to-face MSW programs. The data uncovered in this dissertation may express broader student experiences in MSW education rather than experiences specific to online MSW programs. It is possible, for example, that many MSW students struggle with faculty support in establishing field placements in campus-based programs as well. It is also possible that many MSW students in general feel that they are minimally prepared for their first jobs after graduation, and that participant comments for this dissertation about their preparation for practice after graduation may not reflect on the online delivery method at all. The challenges of MSW education may be falsely attributed to the online delivery when they arise in online programs because that method of delivery is newer and less established than traditional program models.

The inquiry for this dissertation emerged from two prior studies (Levin et al., 2018; B. Moore, 2005) that uncovered widespread belief among social work faculty and leaders that online MSW education was not equivalent to the traditional classroom delivery for preparing the next generation of social work, and that online education is at best marginally effective for these students. The findings from this dissertation suggestion suggest that this belief might be mistaken, that students who have actually experienced online MSW education perceive that they learned enough from their experience and can use these skills in real world employment.

Further research needs to explore why online MSW education may be more effective than the B. Moore (2005) and Levin et al. (2018) studies deem it to be. In this dissertation, I have suggested that the early history of distance education may lead to the false impression that online MSW education is a kind of independent learning with support rather than a fully engaged experience in virtual spaces with new technology. New kinds of research must be conducted and disseminated to correct the poor image of online education that may be held by faculty and administrators.

Conclusion

The pandemic that began in 2020 demonstrated that online social work education can be established quickly under urgent circumstances. Now that all social work programs have used some form of online education, attitudes may change. The hasty transition to remote learning is not the same as carefully designed online MSW education. However, more students and communities will want online education in the future, so social education must be advanced to meet tomorrow's challenges. We have

learned that what was once novel and suspect will become common practice much sooner than we think.

Participants in this dissertation study came from small towns, rural communities, and urban areas out of state. Most were already social workers in the community, but could not participate in advanced learning due to geographic barriers, work schedules, and family obligations. Through their online education at Blossom State, most of them advanced their skills and were able to begin professional social work practice after graduating.

Necessary skills in direct practice are achievable in online MSW education when the coursework and the appropriate field placements are made available. Excellent teaching occurs because of, not in spite of the online delivery, since online education fosters around-the-clock learning and expanded interactivity through increasingly accessible technology like videoconferencing.

Online MSW education is an engaged, vigorous, and exciting experience when it is designed and implemented in a thoughtful way by committed educational leaders. As with face-to-face programs, online MSW education is limited only by the resources available and the commitment of innovative program leaders.

Resistance to online education by social work faculty and program administrators seems to be based on earlier iterations of distance education, leaving the enduring perception that today's online education is a digital version of a 19th century correspondence school or 20th century radio and television lectures. The most formidable barrier to the growth of effective and responsive online social work education is the

misconception that online education is distant, remote, and solitary. None of the participants in this dissertation study described their experience in this way.

The contemporary practice of online MSW education has outgrown the image of independent learning by isolated students because of the efforts of creative and committed leaders who use technological innovation to make learning more immediate and accessible to students who want to become social workers. The innovative work that is being done in online programs needs to be disseminated in the research literature so that decision makers about the future of social work education can be informed by the current practices of online faculty.

The barriers to online MSW education can and must be overcome to make the benefits of social work education available to passionate and committed students like the participants in this dissertation study. Leaders in social work education must talk to each other, and learn from each other's successes and mistakes to keep pace with the expansion of new forms of online education. We must generate new research to improve our current practices in online social work education rather than treat it as a dangerous fad. Most of all, we must listen to students who are ready to accept the burdens of our early mistakes, but want their voices to be heard so that others will have an even better online social work education and communities in need will be better served.

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APPENDIX A: INITIAL INVITATION

Dear [prospective subject's name]: My name is Sam Goia, and I am a doctoral student at Portland State University. I am beginning a study on the impact of online social work on program graduates' ability to work directly with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations. You are being asked to take part in this study because you are a graduate of the first two cohorts of _____ University's online MSW Program. As part of the study, I am interested in your observations about your experiences in the MSW program and your preparation for the work you are now engaged in. I hope that the information I collect will help lead to a better understanding of online social work education and how it prepares students for effective practice. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to engage in a sixty minute long interview that will take place via online videochat which will be videorecorded and transcribed. Questions will be related to your experiences in the online MSW program and your current employment. Additionally, I will send you a transcript of our conversation for you to review and comment on. While participating in this study, the risks to you will be minimal, and may include anxiety and worry about your educational experience or your current employment. I will help maintain your confidentiality by asking you to select a pseudonym before transcribing the interview, and will use that pseudonym when publishing information from the interview. You may also benefit from this study by reflecting on the ways your education has prepared you to be the social worker you are today. You may feel a sense of synergy between your MSW education and your identity as a practicing social worker, and you may come to value your MSW education in new ways. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, and it will not affect your position or your relationship with your supervisor. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without affecting your standing or reputation as a graduate of the MSW program or your current employment. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records. If you have questions or concerns about your participation in this study, contact Samuel Gioia at gioia@pdx.edu or 503.725.8274. If you have concerns about your rights as a research subject, please contact Research and Strategic Partnerships, Market Center Building 6th floor, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288.

Sincerely,

Sam Gioia
Assistant Professor of Social Work Practice

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Sam Gioia, a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership & Policy program of the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because a graduate of Portland State's online MSW program. The researcher hopes to learn how your online MSW education prepared you for effective social work practice with individuals, families, groups and communities. The research will be published in a dissertation to help the researcher meet requirements for a doctoral degree, and the researcher will be working with Professor Candyce Reynolds, his advisor. Dr. Reynolds' email is: drre@pdx.edu.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to respond by email to a brief survey of your demographic background and your employment experience. You will then arrange a time with the researcher to engage in a sixty minute long interview that will take place online and will be recorded, then transcribed for analysis. Questions will be related to your experiences as a student in the online MSW program and your subsequent employment as a social worker. The recording of the video will be transcribed for analysis and the transcript will be identified by a pseudonym and not your name. You will be emailed a transcript of your interview for any corrections you wish to make.

While participating in this study, the risks to you will be minimal, and may include anxiety and worry about revealing negative feelings or opinions about your educational experience. Participants may also feel a sense of anxiousness when discussing your readiness for effective social work practice. You may also benefit from this study by reflecting on what you have gained from your online social work education. You may feel a sense of synergy between your education and your current social work practice.

I will help maintain your confidentiality by asking you to select a pseudonym for yourself before transcribing the interview, and will use those pseudonyms when publishing data. The MSW program you graduated from will also be referred to by a pseudonym. Information that you offer, however, may identify you to readers if you include specific identifying information. You are encouraged to make your own best decisions about your level of comfort.

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, and it will not affect your relationship with the MSW program or its faculty/staff. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without affecting your position or your relationship with your supervisor. If you have questions or concerns about your participation in this study, contact Sam Gioia Watson at gioia@pdx.edu or 503.725.5652.

If you have concerns about your rights as a research subject, please contact Research and Strategic Partnerships, Market Center Building 6th floor, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288. Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree to take part in this study, and that you agree to have the interview digitally audio recorded. A copy of this form is available for your own records.

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

- What is your gender identity? Male? Female? Other (describe)?
- What is your ethnic/racial identity?
 - White, Nonhispanic
 - Hispanic
 - Asian/Pacific Islander
 - Native American
 - Other:
- How many hours on average did you engage in paid employment while you were enrolled in the Online MSW Program? 0-10 hours per week; 11-20 hours per week; 21-30 hours per week; 31-40 hours per week; 41 hours or more per week.
- How many years of full-time equivalent experience did you have **before** enrolling in the MSW program? 0-2 years; 2-4 years; 5 or more years
- How much experience with online technology did you have **before** entering the online MSW Program? None; A little; Some; A lot
- Are you currently employed? What is your job title?
- If you are currently employed, is your employment related to social work?
- How much of your current social work employment involves direct contact with individuals, families, groups, or communities? None; A little; Some; A lot

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I'd like to understand your experiences in the online MSW program.

Tell me about your journey to and through the MSW program?

Follow up prompts

- What led you to enroll in the online MSW program?
- What led you to enroll in the online MSW program at this school?
- What was your experience like?
- What are you doing now?

Describe how online education has prepared you for direct practice

Follow up prompts

- Can you tell me about your experience with the following aspects of your online education and how it prepared you for direct practice
 - Synchronous education, where you and your instructor/other students interacted together at the same time, such as virtual classrooms, individual or group videochats
 - Asynchronous education, where you and your instructor/other students would email, post, or upload and would receive a response later on
 - Field education and onsite supervision
 - Field seminars where you met with the teacher and other students to discuss your field experiences and progress

Can you share examples of when you have used what you learned in your online program in your practice?

Can you describe a particularly helpful educational experience in your online program? (program design, assignments, instructional practices, etc.)

What aspects of the online MSW program could be improved to better prepare you to be a social worker? (program design, assignments, instructional practices, etc.)

What else would you like to say about your online MSW education?

Can you suggest a classmate of this program from the first or second cohort who might be willing to participate in this research project? How could I contact them? Do you know of social media sites where I could invite people from your cohort to participate?