

The Potential of Online Learning in Addressing Challenges in Field Instructor Training

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Abstract

Given the responsibility of faculties of social work to provide accessible education and training opportunities for field instructors, this paper presents the results of a study exploring the potential role of online learning in supporting and training both urban and rural field instructors. While participants preferred face-to-face learning, the reality of time constraints and distance from major centres, as well as increased usage of modern technology, suggest a need for online field instructor training options. Respondents emphasized the importance of face-to-face opportunities for interaction and relationship-building, but expressed a willingness to participate in online field instructor development. The expressed benefits relate to time-saving and financial advantages associated with online education as well as the enhanced accessibility for field instructors living in rural and remote communities.

Keywords: field instructor training, field education challenges, online learning, e-learning, technology, distance education

Introduction

Field education, which is acknowledged as the signature pedagogy of social work (CSWE, 2008; Homonoff, 2008; Schulman, 2005), has always been considered a vital element of social work education (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). Field instructors (practitioners who supervise and instruct students in their field placements) play a key role in the field education process by preparing students for social work practice and ensuring that the school's educational goals are achieved (Dettlaff & Dietz, 2004). Given the importance of field education, the competence of field instructors has a significant impact on both the quality and success of field education. Training for field instructors is widely supported in the literature as a means of ensuring this competency (Bogo, 2005; Bogo

& Vayda, 1998; Dettlaff & Dietz, 2004; Knight, 2001). While many existing studies concentrate on urban field education, the specific needs of rural field instructors are not always considered (Unger, 2003).

Traditionally, face-to-face training methods have been used to train field instructors (Barlow, Rogers & Coleman, 2003). However, face-to-face training is time consuming and not always practical, particularly for rural field instructors or those who live and work at a distance from the university and may not have the resources and time for travel to an urban center. Online delivery is an alternative to face-to-face methods, but is only now being explored as an option for training social work field instructors. Online education has become more common and with the development of interactive technology opportunities for online collaboration and innovation have flourished. Tumin and Fung (2011) suggest evidence that the potential for advances in engagement, collaboration and transformation through developing technological tools are high. This study seeks to expand knowledge in the underdeveloped area of the use of online technology in engaging and educating social work field instructors. It focuses on the potential of online training and development by examining the learning and support needs of field instructors in rural and urban locations in Alberta.

Study Context

Field instruction within the context of the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work faces some unique challenges. As the only social work degree granting institution in Alberta, the University of Calgary runs its social work programs through the major centers of Calgary, Edmonton, and Lethbridge. A 'Learning Circles' BSW curriculum for social work practice in rural, remote, northern, and Aboriginal communities is also offered in various communities across the province. In addition, the Faculty offers two distance programs (BSW Virtual Learning Circles and Distance MSW program) that have students situated around Alberta and across Canada. The resulting geographical dispersion of field instructors for undergraduate and graduate students throughout rural and urban areas poses unique challenges for field instructor training and support. Gathering field instructors to a common location for meetings, supervision, or training is expensive in terms of time and transportation. In an effort to address these challenges, the Faculty of Social Work initiated exploration of new strategies to make training and support more accessible, particularly for field instructors from rural or remote locations.

Literature Review

Field education provides a valuable opportunity for students to integrate classroom theory with practice in a human service workplace setting (Peleg-Oren, Macgowan & Even-Zahav, 2007). The connections between theory and practice or school and field can be unstable; schools focus on theory, scholarship, education, and the future whereas the field focuses on practice, service, efficacy, and the present (Bogo & Globerman, 1999). Field instructors act as mediator and bridge between these two perspectives by guiding students through translating their classroom and theoretical learning into social work practice (Bogo & Vayda, 1998).

Simultaneously acting as educator and practitioner can be challenging for field instructors. However, training can help field instructors navigate these roles more adeptly and improve outcomes for both students and clients (Murdock, Ward, Ligon & Jindani, 2006; Armour, Bain & Rubio, 2004). Without the resources, training, and theoretical tools to transition from practitioner to educator, field instructors may be ineffective. Untrained field instructors may inadvertently provide job training specific to their agency mandate rather than general professional education (Rogers & MacDonald, 1992).

Social workers, including field instructors, are increasingly evaluated on their productivity and field instruction time is not always regarded as productive time (Globerman & Bogo, 2003). Wayne, Bogo, and Raskin (2006) emphasize the challenge faced by social work schools in recent years in developing and maintaining high quality placements. Field instructor satisfaction and retention is a concern. Given the reliance of social work education on the field component and the importance of the satisfaction of field instructors to the success of social work education, it is incumbent upon schools of social work to support field instructors in an effort to recognize their valuable contributions to the profession (Bennett & Coe, 1998; Bogo, 2005). Providing training and ongoing support is one way that schools of social work can contribute to field instructor satisfaction and effectiveness. While there does not appear to be consensus on the ideal content of field instructor training, it is clear that such training should consist of more than merely providing an orientation to the course sequencing, content, policies, and expectations of a specific social work program (Rogers & MacDonald, 1992).

In the context of the University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work programs, there are a great number of rural field instructors throughout the province. Unger (2003) notes that distance from major urban centers can present a challenge when bringing social workers together with

university field liaisons and other professionals. Rural practitioners may need to travel great distances to attend meetings for professional development or networking purposes. Distance also makes regular in-person support between faculty liaisons and field instructors very time consuming (Wolfer, Carney & Ward, 2002).

One potential solution to the challenge posed by geography is distance education. Online education, one incarnation of distance education, can be divided into three categories: synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid or blended learning. Synchronous online methods, such as chat-rooms and video conferencing, provide real-time interaction between learners and instructors, but are subject to some traditional classroom constraints such as fixed dates and times. Asynchronous methods, such as downloadable materials and discussion boards, allow for flexible scheduling but do not offer opportunities for instant feedback or real-time interaction. Hybrid or blended environments integrate aspects of both synchronous and asynchronous online education, allowing for real-time communication while making course materials available for download at the user's convenience (Regan & Youn, 2008).

The literature reflects on-going debate about the efficacy of online education. Regan and Youn (2008) found that a cohort of nursing students in an online course tested higher than their classroom-based counterparts in terms of learning outcomes. Although they suggest that online delivery can elicit superior learning outcomes, the authors found that students were less satisfied with the course than their classroom-based peers. Learner satisfaction with online learning is not only impacted by course content, but also by the effectiveness and ease of use of the technological tools required. In one study the perceived speed of downloading online content was a major predictor of course evaluation scores, with quicker perceived download speeds leading to higher ratings (Chumley-Jones, Dobbie & Alford, 2002). Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai and Tan (2005) conclude that, overall, studies on the effectiveness of online learning are largely inconclusive and that comparisons between online and face-to-face courses have limited use because implementation factors impact the effectiveness of courses, regardless of method of delivery.

While little published material currently exists on the topic of online learning specifically for social work field instructors, adult education literature explores benefits and modalities for effective online teaching and learning (Anderson, 2008; Angelino, Williams & Natvig, 2007). Angelino et al. (2007) address obstacles to participation and suggest strategies for engagement that could be useful to social work educators. Dedman and Palmer (2011) reported extensive use of and comfort with Internet communication and a general willingness of social

work field instructors surveyed to participate in online field instructor training if it were available. Eighty-two percent of respondents indicated they “might” or “definitely would” (p.154) participate in on-line training. This suggests that online training could be a viable option and highlights the need for continued research in the area of online social work field instructor training and support.

Methods

This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed methods research design, utilizing and triangulating both qualitative and quantitative data sources. This design allows the ability to use quantitative data and results to complement and assist in the interpretation of qualitative findings, to further explore elements of emerging hypotheses or findings resulting from the qualitative phase, and to determine the distribution of a particular element or phenomenon within a chosen population (Cresswell, 2003; Morse, 1991).

Qualitative telephone interviews were carried out with a sample of field instructors (n = 33) in order to discover and explore relevant issues and themes. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by a nine question interview guide with the goal of exploring field instructor perceptions of their role, their current sources of support and training, their support and training needs and their opinions of online training and support.

Participants were identified through a convenience sample of active Alberta field instructors who had supervised at least one student in the past twelve months and were recruited through email. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, and a theme analysis was conducted. Given the small convenience sample, the results are not generalizable to the entire University of Calgary field instructor population, or to field instructors in general.

Employing the sequential exploratory design, emerging themes collected from qualitative data were used to create an online survey instrument grounded in the views of the participants. This enabled further examination of key themes to determine their broader existence, prevalence or distribution and make comparisons between field instructors affiliated with the urban and distance programs. Thus, the use of telephone interviews and a province-wide Internet survey allowed the researchers to gain both depth and breadth of new knowledge.

The Internet survey method was selected as a convenient, anonymous, and inexpensive way to reach large numbers of field instructors in a short period of time. The survey was developed using SurveyMonkey software, which allows participants to complete the

Internet survey by going to a specific URL. The survey URL was distributed by the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work in a general e-mail to field instructors who had supervised at least one student in the past twelve months (approximately 300 field instructors across all BSW and MSW programs). The e-mail asked for their voluntary participation during a 3-week period in which the survey was open. The 30-item survey inquired about social work field instructor learning and support needs, and took about 10 minutes to complete. Specific areas explored included: current involvement in social work field instructor training, perceptions of available field instructor training and support resources through the Faculty of Social Work, barriers to involvement in field instructor training and support, and perceived needs for future training and development opportunities. Finally, participants were asked to provide some general demographic information.

Findings

Participants

A total of 101 field instructors participated in the study, with 33 completing the individual phone interviews and 68 completing the Internet survey. Over three-quarters (78%) of all participants were female. Seventy seven percent of respondents were field instructors in one of the university's urban programs, while 11% were field instructors in one of the rural programs and 11% were instructors in the Distance BSW or MSW programs.

Survey participants (n = 68) were asked their age, number of years as a practicing social worker, and highest degree achieved. The majority of participants were under 55 years of age, with 44% reporting they were between the ages of 40 and 54 years old, and 43% reporting they were between the ages of 25 and 39 years old. Only 13% of participants were over the age of 55, and no participants were less than 25 years old. Over half of the participants (58%) had more than ten years of experience as a social worker, and an additional 21% had at least five years of experience. Only 13% of survey participants had less than five years of experience as a social worker. Consistent with these high levels of experience, more than half of the participants surveyed (57%) had a Master's degree, while 37% had a Bachelor's degree, 3% had a Doctoral degree and 3% had a Diploma. In short, the typical study participant was a middle-aged, female social worker with a graduate degree, over ten years experience in the field, practicing in an urban area.

Survey participants had a wide range of student supervision experience, with 24% supervising their first student at the time of the study, 33% having supervised 2-4 students in the past, and 42% having

supervised five or more students in the past. When asked how much time they spent actively supervising students per week, 44% of survey respondents said they spent up to three hours per week in supervision-related activities (e.g., direct supervision, observing the student, practicum paperwork or meetings), and an additional 32% said they spent up to five hours per week in supervision-related activities. Almost one-quarter (24%) of participants stated that they spent more than five hours per week in supervision-related activities when supervising a student.

Perspectives on Field Instructor Training

All survey respondents identified training and support as at least somewhat important in carrying out their roles as field instructors, and 55% identified it as very important. Despite this perceived importance, almost half of survey participants (49%) stated that they spent less than two hours per month accessing or engaging in field instructor training and support. Interestingly, the great majority of participants (95%) stated they were at least somewhat interested in accessing or participating in additional field instructor training or support from the Faculty of Social Work, with 42% stating they were very interested in accessing or participating in additional training and support than they currently access or receive. These findings suggest that while field instructors perceive that training and support are important to their role as field instructor and have an interest in accessing such training and support, many do not actually spend much time accessing such training and support.

To further explore this apparent disconnect between perceived importance and interest in training and field instructor's actual participation and engagement in training and support activities, field instructors were asked about their current sources of training and support, as well as factors they perceive to either facilitate or hinder their access to training and support.

Current Sources of Field Instructor Training and Support

The participants, both surveyed and interviewed, identified four key sources of training and support in their role as field instructors: the University/Faculty, their agency, other field instructors, and text-based or Internet-based sources such as books and journal articles. First, almost half (46%) of field instructors surveyed identified agency supports as their primary source of training and support in relation to their role as field instructors, and 41% identified University/Faculty supports as their primary source. Survey participants stated that agency support was primarily from colleagues (68%) and supervisors (52%), as well as workplace training and professional development opportunities (27%).

Interview participants similarly identified work colleagues (45%) and supervisors (45%) as key sources of support.

Second, both interview participants and survey participants identified University/Faculty supports and training as important aspects of their field instruction. Survey respondents identified the most common sources of University/faculty support and training as: the Faculty's Field Education Manual (57%), the Faculty Liaison working with them and the student (47%), and a beginning of the term orientation for field instructors provided by the Faculty (46%). Interview participants also identified the Faculty Liaison and Faculty-sponsored training opportunities as the most important sources of training and support provided by the University. One interview participant stated:

I did attend a couple of sessions at the [University] this year for field instructors, and they were really good and really beneficial for me. That was awesome just to be able to interact with some of the faculty and learn from them.

Third, field instructors (46% of those surveyed) identified other field instructors as key sources of training and support, which may point to the need or importance of providing field instructors opportunities to connect with and learn from other field instructors. As one interview participant stated, "*just to connect with other field instructors and hear their experiences and their challenges and say, 'oh, wow, I've experienced that too' or 'no, I've never had that,' but learning from their experience.*"

Finally, other text-based or online sources of training and support were identified by over a third (38%) of survey and interview participants combined. These included books, journal articles and websites relating to field instruction. One interview participant stated the following about the usefulness of books:

Some of the printed material I found quite helpful. [The Faculty] sent me a couple of really good resource books. Because those of us who have been out of school, even for a short time, may not remember all the theories and things in the same ways our professors wished we did, and so just to have something that you can refer to about some of the different theories that the student might be learning about.

Factors that Facilitate and Hinder Access to Field Instructor Training and Development

Table 1 summarizes the factors that survey respondents identified as facilitating or hindering their access to field instructor training and

development opportunities. Key factors that facilitated field instructors' participation in field instructor training and development opportunities included: providing free registration for training or development opportunities; providing continuing competency credits that field instructors could use for their ongoing professional registration; making available face-to-face training opportunities, (both in urban centres and in smaller rural areas); focusing on training topics that are relevant not only for field instruction but also for social work practice; and being part of an agency that supports their involvement in field instruction, particularly participation in related training and development opportunities.

Table 1. Factors That Facilitated or Hindered Field Instructors' Access to Training and Development

Facilitating Factors	% of survey respondents* (n = 60)	Hindering Factors	% of survey respondents* (n = 60)
Free registration	63%	Lack of time to attend training	77%
Professional development credits	58%	Registration costs	55%
In-person training opportunities	58%	Travel and related costs	48%
Topics of relevance to field instructors' practice area	55%	Scheduling coverage at work	30%
Agency support to attend training	53%	Lack of agency support	12%

Note. *Participants could identify as many factors as were relevant, hence totals add up to more than 100%

This study also explored the barriers that participants faced that limited their participation in field instructor training and development. Table 1 shows that lack of time was identified by the majority of survey participants as the biggest barrier to their access and attendance at field instructor training and development opportunities. As one survey participant commented, *"sorry, in view of heavy workload and practice, field instructor training is good but not my top priority."* Interview participants similarly identified time as a significant barrier to doing field

instruction in general, and to accessing field instructor training in particular. Furthermore, they expressed that finding time to devote to their students (e.g., for supervision) was a challenge, and training can be a burdensome and additional time commitment. As one field instructor noted, *"you're already taking on a student and that does require extra time and effort to begin with on top of one's regular work duties."*

In short, busy field instructors expressed that in prioritizing activities, given multiple demands on their time, dedicating time to field instructor training and development does not take precedence over direct supervision time with the student or their own regular work duties. This lack of time for field instructor training, and field instruction in general, is well documented in the literature (Bogo & Globerman, 2003; Dedman & Palmer, 2011). Table 1 summarizes other significant barriers to attending field instructor training and development identified by survey participants, including registration costs, travel and related costs, scheduling coverage at work, and lack of agency support. It should be noted that all of these barriers were also identified by interview participants. In regards to travel and related costs, it is perhaps not surprising that rural practitioners found that the time and costs to travel to larger urban centers for training was a significant barrier, particularly given that professional development budgets for many employees have been significantly reduced in the context of recent economic hardships and organizational cutbacks. Indeed, receiving support from the workplace to cover course costs, travel time and expenses, and time away from regular duties was a concern for many field instructors. For example, one interview participant stated that *"the workplace has changed so that any time away from our workplace is more and more difficult for us."* Distance was also identified as a barrier by some urban practitioners who noted that city travel can be quite time consuming.

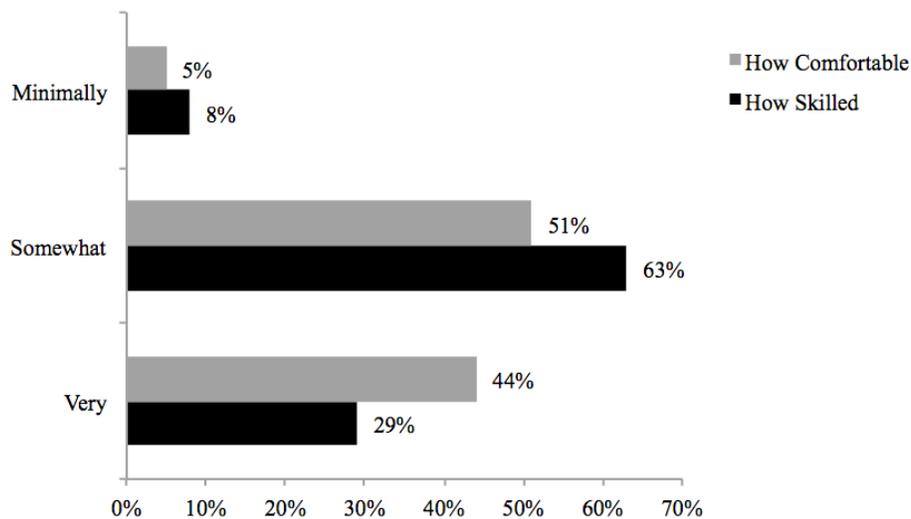
Field Instructors' Experiences with Technology and Online Learning

Given the variety of barriers limiting field instructors' ability to access and attend training and development opportunities, is online field instructor training an option to reduce costs and facilitate access and participation by busy field instructors? To begin to understand the viability of online field instructor training, participants were asked about their previous experiences with online learning, as well as their knowledge, skills and comfort with technology in general.

Sixty-five percent of survey participants indicated that they had previously participated in online learning, as did 45% of interview participants. Interview participants added that their experience in online learning came from a variety of sources, such as workplace training and taking online courses during their social work education.

Survey participants were asked to rate their overall comfort and skill level with using technology such as computers and the Internet. Figure 1 shows that participants reported more comfort than skill with technology, with almost half of the participants (44%) rating themselves as very comfortable with the technology but only 29% rating themselves as very skilled. Still, the majority of participants reported being at least somewhat comfortable (95%) and skilled (92%) with using technology.

Figure 1. Survey of Field Instructors' (N = 63) Comfort and Skill Level with Using Technology



The majority of survey participants also indicated they had used or accessed a variety of other technologies. The most commonly used of these technologies or tools were online academic journals (86%), online discussion forums/boards or chats (71%), videoconferencing (69%), and online course management technologies such as Blackboard or Web-CT (56%). In short, survey participants were already using or accessing a variety of technologies and tools. Thus, the results may suggest that the use of technology itself may not be a significant barrier to field instructor training.

Perspectives on Online Training and Development Opportunities

Participants were asked if they would participate in online field instructor training or professional development opportunities (e.g., an online workshop or course) as part of their role as field instructor. The majority of survey participants (81%) reported that they would participate in online

training, while some (19%) stated that they would not. The majority of interview participants also indicated a willingness to participate in online training or at least some openness to consider it.

Survey participants who reported that they would participate in online training and development opportunities were asked the reasons for their participation in these online activities. Table 2 shows that the increased convenience (82%) and accessibility (75%) of online learning were the two top reasons cited by field instructors for participating in online training and development. As one interview participant stated:

I would be very open to online learning and I think that it would offer flexibility, particularly in an agency like this where it's not like the work just sits there until I come back if I'm gone for training... People need to answer the phones and people want to come in, so, yeah, I would be totally open to that.

Table 2. Field Instructors' Reasons for Willingness to Participate or Not in Online Training and Professional Development Opportunities

Reasons for participating	% of survey respondents* (n = 51)	Reasons for NOT participating	% of survey respondents* (n = 12)
Convenience	82%	Lack of time	50%
Increased accessibility of training	75%	Difficulty establishing meaningful connections with others through the Internet	42%
Opportunities for self-directed learning	63%	Lack of computer skills or comfort	25%
Quick access to information	63%		
Reduced costs (e.g., travel)	49%		

Note. *Participants could identify as many factors as were relevant, hence totals add up to more than 100%

Table 2 shows that other reasons for field instructors' willingness to participate in online training included increased opportunities to be self-directed in their learning, the ability to access information quickly and when needed, and reduced costs (e.g., travel) involved with participating in online training as compared to face-to-face training. It is important to note that these cited advantages to online training appear to at least partially address many of the challenges reported by field instructors with attending face-to-face training (e.g., lack of time, costs, scheduling coverage at work) by providing training that field instructors can easily access at a time and place that is convenient to them.

The minority of survey participants (19%) who reported that they would not participate in online training opportunities if provided were asked the reasons for not wanting to participate in such training opportunities. Table 2 shows that lack of time was the most commonly cited reason for not engaging in online learning (50%), and so it is interesting that these participants perhaps did not perceive that online learning would save them time as compared to face-to-face opportunities.

Difficulties establishing meaningful relationships electronically (42%) was also cited as a reason for not engaging in online learning. As one interview participant stated, *"I just find that if I can only see a name and I can't talk to a person and see their face, it's not - I don't tend to make a connection."* Another interview participant similarly stated, *"the thing that doesn't connect for me in the same way online is the relationship. I'm still a social worker at heart. I need that relationship in order for the connection to be there."* Finally, a few of the participants who stated they would not engage in online learning reported that their lack of computer skills or comfort was a factor (25%).

Training and Development Preferences and Suggestions

Despite the willingness of the majority of field instructors surveyed to participate in online training (81%), more field instructors stated that they would prefer that training or professional development opportunities be provided either face-to-face (38%) or blended (42%) than offered fully online (19%). Thus, while field instructors saw the advantages of online opportunities, they still valued and preferred face-to-face opportunities when given a choice. As alluded to above, a key factor in this preference is the opportunity to form relationships with other field instructors that was seen as being much more meaningful in a face-to-face format than online.

[Online learning] is kind of a solitary activity and the payoff that I might get from doing it is what I might learn, right?

Whereas if it's, let's bring all the field instructors into a room, I not only get the payoff of what I might learn, but I get to meet new people, and I get to see people I haven't seen for a while... and I get to hear about how other people are doing, face-to-face.

The preference for face-to-face, or a combination of face-to-face and online learning, is also consistent with field instructors' reports that other field instructors are a critical source of learning and support. Given the importance of relationship, networking, and connecting with other field instructors, it seems that this is a key aspect of developing effective and engaging online training and development opportunities for field instructors. This finding may also be indicative of field instructors being interested in a variety of training and development opportunities, both face-to-face and online. Such opportunities can allow field instructors to further their training and development, as well as to connect and learn with other field instructors. One recommendation from some participants was to include an initial face-to-face person-to-person meeting to assist field instructors in their ability to visualize a “face to a name” in further online interactions. Other options raised by interviewees included developing an online repository of resources and materials for field instructors, providing face-to-face workshops as well as more informal gathering opportunities for field instructors at the annual provincial conference for social workers, where many field instructors are already in attendance.

Finally, field instructors were asked to indicate the topics they were most interested in learning about as field instructors. Undoubtedly, the most commonly cited topic for field instructor training and development among those surveyed was supervision theories and techniques (82%). Other topics of interest included professional ethics and dealing with ethical issues (50%), field education roles and expectations (48%), and social work theories and techniques (47%). Hence, field instructors expressed an interest in expanding their knowledge and skills in areas directly related to their roles and responsibilities as field instructors as well as in areas related to their practice.

Discussion

Despite being able to identify the advantages of an online approach (particularly for resource-scarce agencies and rural/remote social workers), overall, participants preferred in-person training and support and expressed beliefs that online training was not as effective or as satisfactory. Although Dedman and Palmer (2011) found no correlation

between demographic variables and willingness to participate in online training, younger participants who have grown up utilizing technology may be more comfortable and receptive to online training than their older counterparts. Highlighting the advantages of online delivery to disinclined field instructors may alleviate their reluctance to participate in online or blended learning opportunities (Dykman & Davis, 2008). Clear advantages include eliminating travel time and being able to take training through the Internet anywhere, anytime, at a personal preferred pace and flexible schedule (Dedman & Palmer, 2011). There are also opportunities for online consultation with a broader community of practice, unconstrained by geographical boundaries, as well as increased accessibility of field coordinators and directors. Receiving professional development credits is a perceived advantage and can increase field instructors' motivation for participating in online training (Dedman & Palmer, 2011).

Since a majority of field instructors expressed interest in both face-to-face and online opportunities, it is suggested that the advantages of both be utilized. Faculties of social work may be advised to provide learning opportunities using a range of formal and informal training and support methods provided by written, online, and in-person activities. Choice of synchronous and asynchronous methods of participation may also be important such as allowing participants to choose between written discussion boards, real-time audio conversations, or simply a posting of materials for review (Dedman & Palmer, 2011). An online repository of information for field instructors could be developed that provides evidence-based materials that directly relate to field placement supervision, making accessible information that can address field instructor concerns.

Social work is a *social* profession and participants identified other field instructors as a key source of support and preparation for their role. It is important, therefore, to create opportunities for field instructors to interact, network, and share learning with their peers. Field instructors benefit from the telling of stories and from discussing practice experiences with others (Barlow, Rogers & Coleman, 2001). Time for such discussion should be included in the training format.

Online education for field instructors must attend to the human and social needs of field instructors and emphasize engagement, interaction, and relationship development. There are strategies for addressing such needs in an online environment by engaging participants in team activity and interaction (Hurst & Thomas, 2008). If a social worker believes that online training threatens the social core of the profession by removing the familiar face-to-face communication, then they may be reluctant to participate. One survey participant expressed that "technology is *never* a

replacement for human contact.” Taking time to build connections among members in the online environment is recommended as well as intentionality in addressing universal relationship factors of respect, understanding, trust, integrity, and reciprocity.

Field instructors identified agency supports as important to facilitating their involvement in training or professional development activities. Consistent with previous findings (Wayne, Bogo & Raskin, 2006), this study found agency support for the cost and time required for field supervision training to be generally lacking. Offering training at no cost is important to field instructors from agencies where professional development budgets have been reduced or removed. While colleagues, work supervisors, and some written resources are outside of the university’s direct control, the university can forge relationships with agencies that employ field instructors and can ensure that support, training, and professional development, including accurate and up-to-date written materials, are accessible to field instructors as needed.

If field instructors are to participate in online training, some may require support in learning how to make use of the technology. Field instructors may not be experienced in discussion boards or in online classrooms and some may require support related to basic computer literacy. Preparation of online field instructor training is time-intensive, given that it must attend to the principles of adult education and effective online delivery, address the factors of engagement and relevance as well as provide a quality learning experience within the online environment. A significant barrier to progress in this area relates to heavy institutional workload expectations placed on field education offices (Macdonald, 2003) and the paradoxical “non-academic model” and ascribed status of field education personnel in many schools of social work as “least powerful and least valued” (Globerman & Bogo, 2000, p.117). Further enhancement to the notion of utilizing online teaching and learning strategies to expand approaches to support and training for social work field instructors requires institutional support and a valuing of field education within the university, as well as encouragement of the integration of research, teaching and practice.

Implications

Universities must play a key role in the provision of training, support, and professional development opportunities for field instructors and are challenged by the responsibility to make such offerings accessible. This study speaks to the both the advantages of distance education and to the existing perceptions of superiority of on-site training methods (York, 2008) while giving voice to field instructors regarding their training

needs. While a preference is expressed for face-to-face learning, the reality of time constraints and distance factors as well as increased common usage of modern technology suggest that the time has come for augmented on-line field instructor training.

Distance education, and particularly online training, may present a way to overcome geographic, economic, and scheduling barriers. However, the findings suggest a need for caution and sensitivity to the expressed preference for opportunities for in-person interaction. Therefore, consideration may need to be given to program designs that blend a variety of educational approaches to address issues of accessibility, time, interaction and relationship building. Furthermore, economy, convenience and accessibility must not trump quality when it comes to the content and process of educating field instructors. Although there have been some online offerings in social work field education training in recent years, there has been little research on the unique attributes and comparative effectiveness of such offerings. Further research is needed to review the use of technology in field instructor training to date, as the use of online field instructor training becomes more common in social work field education.

To summarize, existing research provides valuable information on the needs for creative approaches to providing accessible field instructor training. However, further study is required to observe the impact and assess the effectiveness of online field instructor training. Institutional factors requiring consideration include prioritizing of social work field education and the provision of adequate support to university field offices. It is incumbent upon faculties of social work, whose existence depends on the contributions of workers in the field, to place a high value on field education and to respond to the expressed need of field instructors for professional development opportunities not only related to their roles and responsibilities as field educators but as practitioners and role models to students, the future of the profession.

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