

# Digital Literacy in Social Work Education

*A Case Study Incorporating Technology and Social Media  
Within the Social Work Curriculum*

**Karen Zgoda**

*University of Massachusetts Boston*

**Kryss Shane**

*Los Angeles, CA*

## Abstract

To remain competitive and culturally competent, social work education must incorporate digital literacy and technological instruction to prepare students for work with clients and colleagues throughout their professional lives. When instructors offer a grounding in technology skills for modern social work practice and provide feedback to students in a supportive classroom setting, social work students become more confident and poised to handle the complications of technology and social media while interacting with clients, agencies, nonprofit organizations, and society as a whole. The purpose of this article is to present a case study of a social work course on classic and contemporary communication skills that focuses on communication, writing, and digital literacy, designed for BSU students. The article includes rationale for course development, course description, and sample digital writing activities from the course.

**Keywords:** *social work; digital literacy; communication skills; writing; technology; Twitter; social media; class activities; case study*

Social workers and other nonprofit professionals communicate with people constantly, and learning how to write and communicate well in whatever format is important for successful outcomes. In daily professional practice, social workers may write case records, referrals, résumés and cover letters, grant applications, letters to the editor, newspaper articles, research articles for journals, and articles for other publications (Glicken, 2008). Social workers also interact routinely with clients, community agencies, nonprofits, government officials, and other social workers. The social worker's ability to communicate effectively can affect client outcomes, job performance, career development, and other social work treatment outcomes (MSW@USC Staff, 2011; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2011).

Major role changes in social work communication are occurring largely due to constant and consistent advances in social media. Social work students require proper training to learn the skills to use technology effectively to be culturally competent with today's clients and to meet current NASW technology practice, CSWE EPAS, and HIPAA guidelines (Finn & Lavitte, 1995; NASW & Association of Social Work Boards, 2005; Rafferty & Steyaert, 2009; Smyth, 2010). The American Library Association (2012) has broadly defined digital literacy as "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills" (What Is Digital Literacy? section, para. 1). Young (2012) posited,

Human service organizations are also beginning to adopt social media and social work educators need to understand how to prepare social work students with the necessary skills for effective social media practice. The key premise is that using social media in the classroom or in the field should not be so focused on what tools to use or what those tools allow, although this is important. Educators need to understand the participatory nature of social media and how new media literacies can compliment [*sic*] social work practice. (Overview of the Literature section, para. 15)

Because of increasingly ubiquitous technology and social media use, the words that social workers write today not only affect them, their colleagues, and their clients in the moment, but also have staying power and permanence that can affect their career or clients years later. The NASW (2011) stated, "Be aware that everything you write reflects on you as a professional" (p. 3). Students would greatly benefit from having guidance and feedback from their professors as they develop their professional voices.

In addition, guided instruction on social media best practices may enhance digital literacy preparation for real-world situations. Government and nonprofit organizations are increasingly using social media such as Twitter to connect and communicate with constituents (Hitchcock & Battista, 2013; Svensson, Mahoney, & Hambrick, 2015). Parrott and Madoc-Jones (2008) asserted that information communication technologies in social work practice have the potential to amplify an individual social worker's voice and to aid in client empowerment in the face of social injustices. Sitter and Curnew (2016) used social media such as YouTube videos to help students practice social media engagement and online advocacy for social justice purposes. Recently, there has been growing interest in having social work students participate in chats using social media such as Twitter. Hitchcock and Young (2016) found that using Twitter chat assignments helped students develop their professional networks. Hitchcock and

Battista (2013) also found that Twitter chat assignments helped students develop critically needed digital literacy skills. Zgoda and Shane (in press) explored the use of Twitter as a vehicle for participating in social action activities.

## Social Work Course Case Study

This case study is based on a course developed for Bridgewater State University (BSU) students and taught in Fall 2016 at BSU, a public university located in Southeastern Massachusetts. The course was called Social Work 2.0: Classic and Contemporary Communication Skills. The following are examples of assignments used in this course to help students learn and practice digital literacy skills.

### Discussion Board Posts

The class had weekly discussion board posts using the campus Blackboard learning management system. The goal for this assignment was to require the students not only to think and to document their thought process, but also to participate in a shared experience with classmates, in which conversation and debate could occur. This assignment especially helped students to consider the impact of social media and technology on in-class learning and on future practical interactions with clients. It also got students in the regular habit of writing. Ground rules for online discussions were adopted from Connor (2017).

This case on ethics and academic integrity was used with permission from Academic Integrity Case Studies (2001):

Lee has to write a paper on some of the causes and symptoms of drug abuse for a public health class. He accesses the Web and finds several chat rooms that feature posted questions which are answered by doctors. He uses their answers in his paper, citing just “Internet” as the source. He also finds a site that is put together by the mother of a recovering addict which contains information that she has compiled as a resource for other families in similar circumstances. Steve also uses this information, and since the author of the site does not indicate which books she got the information from, he cites “Internet” again as the source.

1. Is this sufficient?
2. Is this a form of plagiarism or academic dishonesty?
3. Why or why not?
4. What else would you do if this was your paper?

### #MacroSW Twitter Chat Assignment

The focus on providing information about digital literacy skills allows students to participate in technology-based discussions and interactions with current and future colleagues in the professional social work field. The Twitter chat provides real-time responses to questions as well as feedback to every participant. For additional information on using #MacroSW Twitter chats as classroom activities, see Zgoda, Hitchcock, and Battista-Fraze (2016), Hitchcock and Young (2016), and Hitchcock (2016). The following are steps to prepare for the activity:

1. Prepare for the chat:
  - b. Review previous chats to learn how they work: <https://macrosw.com/chat-archives/>
  - c. Review the chat announcement for chat details and chat questions: <https://macrosw.com/2016/11/28/a-true-history-of-social-workers-online-macrosw-121-at-9-pm-est/>
  - d. Review tips and tricks for participating in a Twitter chat: <http://www.laureliversonhitchcock.org/2015/01/08/how-to-participate-in-a-live-twitter-chat-tips-for-social-workers/>
2. Chat participation
  - a. Participate in the Twitter chat on [professor provides set date/time]
  - b. Use hashtag #MacroSW in each tweet to participate in the conversation and to help the professor find your tweets
  - c. Tweets
    - i. Introduction tweet
    - ii. Ask both the chat experts and the professor at least one question each
    - iii. Post two responses to the chat questions (listed here: <https://macrosw.com/2016/11/28/a-true-history-of-social-workers-online-macrosw-121-at-9-pm-est/>), including sharing resources
    - iv. Start a conversation with at least one person participating in the chat that is not the professor, a classmate, or the guest expert
3. Twitter chat reflection paper (10 points) due [Date and time set by the professor], 4 pages max
  - a. Reflect on your experience participating in the Twitter chat. Use the following questions as a guide:
    - i. What did you learn, if anything?
    - ii. What did you find interesting, if anything?
    - iii. What do you think social workers should know about Twitter?
    - iv. Would you recommend using Twitter chats to social workers? Why or why not?
    - v. Include links to at least five tweets you liked or found helpful, interesting, or informative.
    - vi. Add anything else you would like to share about your first Twitter chat!

### Social Media Campaign Project

The goal of the social media project is to create a scenario in which students will be required to demonstrate their technological literacy through the use of social media within a professional social work setting. During this project, students work in small groups to create a social media campaign based on an issue at a fictional nonprofit or social services agency. This assignment may be given for completion individually or in small groups; small groups are recommended so that students gain practice in working together and communicating in groups.

**Scenario 1: Homelessness.** At agency HomeAgain, there was a recent police raid, which turned up numerous drugs in the homeless shelter. The news has spread, and the public is very vocal about their opinions of their tax dollars going to support a people who are drug users and a place where drugs are stashed. You are a case worker at HomeAgain, and your supervisor is overwhelmed trying to handle the situation and check on the clients who are experiencing the stress of the press and the public's opinions. Your supervisor asks you to address the situation using social media, in a way that is helpful to the clients' needs and addresses the concerns of the media and the public.

**Scenario 2: Mental health.** You are a case worker at MentalHealthRUs. Your agency has never had a social media program. You have been assigned to create a social media voice for the agency and have been encouraged to use creativity. However, the day before you are intending to launch a website and social media usernames, a movie premieres that portrays people with mental health struggles as stupid, crazy, or dangerous. Your supervisor asks you to pivot your social media plan and address this before it creates problems for the community, who may see the movie at any time and who may internalize the movie's beliefs.

**Scenario 3: Children.** You are a caseworker at Just4Kids, an agency that focuses on meeting the needs of low-income children. The news recently announced that there are more children in need in the county where Just4Kids operates than anywhere else in the state and that 95% of the residents of the county have no idea that the children in their community are struggling so much. Your supervisor tasks you with using social media in creative ways to educate the public and to let those in need become aware of the services available at Just4Kids.

**Scenario 4: Older adults.** In many cultures, elders are revered. However, in America, many elderly people feel unimportant and discarded. As a case worker at Alliance4Elders, your clients regularly comment about how they feel unwanted by their loved ones. After you discuss this with your supervisor, the supervisor encourages you to use social media to creatively bring awareness to this problem with your clients and with elders throughout the country and to assist the clients in finding potential solutions to this experience.

Your final report should be formatted as a professional proposal (e.g., <https://blog.hootsuite.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Social-Media-Proposal.docx>). Your proposal should include the following:

1. Goals and objectives
  - a. Measurable outcomes—follow the S.M.A.R.T. guidelines: <https://blog.hootsuite.com/smart-social-media-goals/>
  - b. Strategy
  - c. Budget
2. Staffing plan
3. Tactics and marketing
  - a. Social media tools and description
  - b. Sample posts, tweets, and other social media content
  - c. Schedule

## Implications for Theory or Policy

Considering the implications of digital literacy and social media expertise in social work education courses, it is much easier to integrate this into core curriculum at the bachelor's and master's levels than to offer the course simply as an elective. This not only guarantees that all graduates have the proper training and skills for utilizing technology in their professional lives but also avoids having the technology instruction siloed, all content placed either in one subject or on one instructor. This may help to garner support for these curriculum changes from the majority of the administrators and from the teaching staff. It is advisable to offer training to faculty to ensure technology mastery of the material.

Although many university programs have their own core curriculum, schools with social work accreditation should consider working together to create a list of ways to include technology in existing social work coursework at any level. By creating universal social work education policies that integrate technology into the current classroom studies, these programs allow students to learn to utilize the benefits of the Internet and social media in a format that fits the social work world and follows the code of ethics they will soon be bound by when they enter social work practice. This may only require small changes to the course assignments rather than significant work on the part of the professor. These changes, as examples within this article show, can be a fun and engaging way for students to interact with other students, with professors at other schools, or with professionals they may not otherwise meet.

Clearly, additional and consistent research needs to be done to ascertain the extent that digital literacy benefits social work students, with specific attention being paid to the interactions of digital correspondence between social workers and their clients and to how social workers use social media to participate in social justice. This not only benefits the curriculum programs at all social work-accredited universities, but also provides updated information on a regular basis, as new research must always consider the consistently updated world of technology and social media and how it affects students, practicing social workers, and interactions with social work client.

## Suggestions for Classroom Instruction

When creating lesson plans for students, the instructor must be aware of the generalized standard of Internet access for young people. Elementary school students have often had access to MP3 players and tablets for much of their lives, middle school students have likely already created and run their own social media accounts, and high school students are well versed in keeping blogs and online journals and utilizing the Internet for shopping and education. Although many professors did not become familiar with the Internet and did not begin to use social media until their adult years, it is crucial that they create lesson plans with consideration to the online experience of their classes.

It is not advisable to spend a great deal of classroom time and course assignments asking students to think about the basics of social media or reviewing others' blogs and writing about their findings. Instead, professors need to build from students' current knowledge and introduce new constructs for technology and social media. One example of this is the use of social media for political networking. Such assignments re-

quire students to use their current social media accounts to tie them to political causes they support. Student can reach out to local politicians by following them on Twitter, joining a Facebook group that alerts group members to a local politician's votes or town hall meetings, or using Instagram or Snapchat (using hashtags to connect their images to the event's followers) to show images of the student attending a political event.

For classrooms with more time to devote to pairing social media and digital literacy, assignments may be more in depth and cover multiple class sessions. In these situations, assignments may be rooted in ideas that take time to grow, allowing the calendar to support the message. For example, students could create a social media campaign to show support or awareness for a cause they care about. They can be given a goal of tailoring their message to reach the most people by using social media to garner attention through images, hashtags, likes, retweets, favorites, and other responses. Students can then be given additional assignments to compare their experience with others' in the class, to create several social media posts using different techniques to see which gains the most response, and to complete an essay regarding which types of messages most benefit from a social media campaign, in a world of people who all seem to want social media attention. This well-rounded assignment requires students to use their current knowledge of social media and their previous and current experience with social media campaigns to create new knowledge, which they use in real-life situations; students then evaluate their methods and lessons in written format.

### **Suggestions for Consultants**

Consultants tasked with helping a school, department, or nonprofit agency integrate technological literacy into their training and educational culture can begin by assessing what exists within the parameters of the written and unwritten value system. They can offer students and staff access to surveys that inquire what forms of social media are used, what types of social movements are important to the group, and whether the two are linked in the minds of survey participants. This creates a baseline that can be used to compare new protocols and to gauge which aspects of combining technology and social justice are already occurring.

Once the information is ascertained, meetings or surveys with staff and faculty can begin. These allow consultants to understand what is important to educators, what social justice policies the school and program openly promote, and what questions remain regarding creating new inclusions into lesson planning without undermining current structures or mandated performance requirements. By addressing concerns, consultants help alleviate stress on staff, at both faculty and adjunct levels, who may feel overwhelmed by the idea of being expected to reconfigure their class structures, because many often juggle university teaching with publishing or outside employment. By calming their worries and clarifying the reasons for technology integration, consultants create an opportunity for excitement about introducing new content and about tying course content into real-world environments for students. Some consultants may also choose to bring teaching assistants (TAs) into these discussions, because they create a bridge between students and teachers and may have suggestions to create learning methods based on what they observe within their work and within their time on campus.

Consultants may choose to work with the school to offer publication opportunities, awards, or other rewards to educators who complete additional work to create new technology-based course content or who are most innovative in aiding students in partnering their social justice beliefs with technology and pairing that with their classroom lessons. This can become a great incentive for all involved to continue to push past the status quo and to utilize the community and the needs for social justice within the local area to accomplish these goals. As students become more technologically advanced, and as new forms of social media are born, consultants may wish to adjust their initial survey and use it to manage or assess change, to reinforce or reconsider how to best marry social justice and technology in the minds and behaviors of students.

## References

- Academic Integrity Case Studies. (2001). Case study #5: Sources. Retrieved from <http://tutorials.istudy.psu.edu/academicintegrity/academicintegrity9.html>
- American Library Association. (2012). Digital literacy definition. Retrieved from <http://connect.ala.org/node/181197>
- Connor, P. (2017). Netiquette: Ground rules for online discussions. Retrieved from <http://teaching.colostate.edu/tips/tip.cfm?tipid=128>
- Finn, J., & Lavitte, M. (1995). A survey of information technology-related curriculum in undergraduate work programs. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, 1(1), 39–53.
- Glicken, M. (2008). *A guide to writing for human service professionals*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hitchcock, L. (2016, March 14). Using #MacroSW in the classroom [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://www.laureliversonhitchcock.org/2016/03/14/using-macro-sw-in-the-classroom/>
- Hitchcock, L., & Battista, A. (2013). Social media for professional practice: Integrating Twitter with social work pedagogy. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, 18(Suppl. 1), 33–45.
- Hitchcock, L., & Young, J. (2016, January). Tweet, tweet! Using live Twitter chats in social work education. *Social Work Education*, 35, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2615479.2015.1136273>
- MSW@USC Staff. (2011, May 18). Top five skills in a social worker's professional toolkit [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://msw.usc.edu/mswusc-blog/top-five-skills-in-a-social-workers-professional-toolkit/>
- National Association of Social Workers. (2011). *Strengthening your writing skills: An essential task for every social worker*. Retrieved from <http://careers.socialworkers.org/documents/WritingSkillsLL.pdf>
- National Association of Social Workers & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *NASW & ASWB standards for technology and social work practice* [Brochure]. Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers.



- Parrott, L., & Madoc-Jones, I. (2008). Reclaiming information and communication technologies for empowering social work practice. *Journal of Social Work, 8*, 181–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017307084739>
- Rafferty, J., & Steyaert, J. (2009). Social work in the digital age. *British Journal of Social Work, 39*, 589–598. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcp046>
- Sitter, K. C., & Curnew, A. H. (2016). The application of social media in social work community practice. *Social Work Education, 35*, 271–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2015.1131257>
- Smyth, N. (2010, September 10). When is cultural incompetence okay? [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://njsmyth.wordpress.com/2010/09/10/when-is-cultural-incompetence-okay/>
- Svensson, P. G., Mahoney, T. Q., & Hambrick, M. E. (2015, December). Twitter as a communication tool for nonprofits: A study of sport-for-development organizations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 44*, 1086–1106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764014553639>
- Young, J. (2012, October 31). Participatory culture and Web 2.0: Bringing new media literacies to social work education [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://jimmysw.com/2012/10/31/participatory-culture-and-web-2-0-bringing-new-media-literacies-to-social-work-education/>
- Zgoda, K., Hitchcock, L., & Battista-Fraze, K. (2016). Hashtags for social work: Technology and Twitter chats. *The New Social Worker, 23*(2). Retrieved from <http://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/technology-articles/hashtags-for-social-work-technology-and-twitter-chats/>
- Zgoda, K., & Shane, K. (in press). Social justice 140 characters at a time: The role of Twitter in social action.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner.  
Further reproduction prohibited without permission.