

Electronic Connection: Teach Your Teachers

Contributed by Marshall L. Smith, PhD

Today's social work students' parents were exhorted to "Teach Your Children" by Crosby, Stills, and Nash in their popular song of 1970. It was not a one-sided encouragement, as the second verse urged children to teach their parents well. It is the same today. Parents of many current students have had good exposure to computers and are e-mail and Internet savvy. However, as in all generations, people become comfortable with what they know and tend to remain at the level of learning with which they have developed comfort. Such is the case with some social work educators. {mosgoogle right}

Many BSW educators, in particular, were schooled in the "early days" (i. e., 1990s) at their annual conferences by the workshops of the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD) Technology Committee, who offered such "cutting edge" sessions as "Cheap E-mail for Social Faculty Whose Universities Do Not Have E-mail" (What university or college today does not have E-mail?), "FTP Made Easy" (For some reason, social work educators could not seem to master the notion of File Transfer Protocol, something we all now take for granted and is built into any software that supports moving files from one location to another.), and "Why You Need Virus Protection Software" (yes, most people had to be convinced that viruses were real). The workshops were usually well attended, and Technology Committee members brought their own laptops, digital projectors, and floppy disks (the "real, 5¼ inch floppy disks" which actually could bend) with handouts on them.

Needless to say, these BSW educator pioneers learned well and are now some of the leading presenters at BPD and Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) conferences on the use of technology in social work education, or just in using technology to support their presentations. It truly has been a low-budget, high volunteer, collective effort to bring ourselves up and past the leading edge of using technology in our teaching. In fact, BSW educators were often ahead of other faculties at their own schools for a significant period of time and were asked to serve on technology committees at their home institutions.

Then came today's generation of students. To illustrate the potential disconnect between the "cutting edge" social work educators described above and current students entering college today, according to the recent Mindset Lists of Beloit College (<http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset/>):

Thanks to MySpace and Facebook, current students think that autobiography can happen in real time.

Virtual reality has always been available for current students when the real thing failed.

Avatars have nothing to do with Hindu deities.

Current students are wireless, yet always connected.

Current students grew up with and have outgrown faxing as a means of communication.

Current students have rarely mailed anything using a stamp.

Being techno-savvy has always been inversely proportional to age.

Current students may have fallen asleep playing with their Gameboys in the crib.

Libraries have always been the best centers for computer technology and access to good software.

To this list, we can add familiarity with iPods, iPhones, Second Life, and many other emerging technologies. True, some faculty keep up with these developments, but there are also many faculty who see their teaching as limited to space and time by their classroom and course meeting schedule. Therefore, I say to today's students: "Teach Your Teachers."

Bring them into the world of online social presence. Show them that it is possible to connect with others in significant ways not conceived of in our Human Behavior and Social Environment textbooks. Convince them that one can relate at the same levels lectured about by Helen Harris Perlman. Lead them toward seeing how group dynamics play out in online discussions, chat rooms, and Second Life in the same ways that early groupwork authors such as Vinter, Sarri, Glasser, and later authors such as Toseland and Rivas have taught us happens in all groups. Imagine the emerging field of cyber-groupwork.

Redefine the term "face-to-face" to mean significant direct human interaction, regardless of what human senses are involved. Deaf social work students have taught me that I miss so much with my eyes when observing other people that they have learned to compensate for to highly skillful levels. If Deaf social workers can observe at the same skill level as Hearing social workers, then we all can stretch our abilities, no matter what senses we have. But these skills do not develop overnight. They must be studied and practiced under supervision.

Here is where your faculty members can be helpful. You may have the newly emerging (evolving?) skills, but your teachers know what is needed to hone them and nurture them to professional levels. But first, you may need to help them become aware of these new possibilities. Again, I say, not all teachers will need this "awareness therapy," but many do.

Here's a list of some things that you may be able to teach your teachers:

1. There are "textbooks" (only used in the context of formal education courses) and "trade books" (the books graduates read about their field after their degrees are completed). Hardly anyone reads a textbook after graduation. Some of us keep our textbooks, intending to refer to them later, but usually our reading progresses to more readable prose in our areas of interest. What if teachers drew more of their readings for courses from trade publications and journal articles than textbooks?

2. It is the current "rage" for universities and colleges to have teachers use specialized software called "courseware" (e.g., Blackboard, WebCT, Angel, Desire2Learn, Prometheus, Sakai, and so forth) to deliver the content, contain discussions, keep track of grades, serve as assignment dropboxes, and gather course resources in one place. I think this was initially attractive to faculty members new to using the Internet to communicate with students. It helped them to organize all of the separate bits of courses in "one place" (well, one virtual place, that is). But students can become bored with these interfaces very quickly as they see the same format greeting them in practically every course they enroll in. Teachers need to be encouraged to "take off their Internet training wheels" and explore how to employ these courseware tools differently, or even go outside the confines of the official university courseware, discover other stand-alone tools, and use them in creative ways that will engage students in mutual exploration. Chances are that you know some of these tools that can be adapted to social work education. The use of these stand-alone tools is analogous to reading trade publications rather than the textbook-like quality of university courseware:

Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/>)

MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com/>)

SecondLife (<http://secondlife.com/>)

Online surveys (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/>)

Simulations and games (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simulation_game)

Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>)

Google Apps (<http://www.google.com/a/>)

3. Similarly, research is often taught in higher education using something like Minitab or the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to perform statistical analysis. I think this was a great step forward over having to use a calculator or hand calculation of statistical results. However, once a student graduates, very few agencies or individual social workers purchase Minitab or SPSS statistical packages, and you can guess what happens to the analytical skills acquired during one's social work education—they atrophy and disappear. What if statistics were taught using the built-in analytical tools of spreadsheet software like Microsoft Excel? The level of statistics used commonly in BSW and MSW programs is certainly possible within the abilities of today's spreadsheet software. If students were taught to analyze data in spreadsheets, they would be more likely to continue to use this tool after graduation.

4. Although I mentioned Microsoft Excel above, even that is not always available to everyone after graduating. Yes, it is probably available if you purchase a new computer for your own use, but as many of you know, social agencies do not always have budgets to purchase the kinds of software we come to be familiar with in the academic environment. However, what if more social work education programs began to expose students to OpenOffice (<http://www.OpenOffice.org>), a multiplatform and multilingual office suite and an open-source project? It is compatible with all other major office suites (including Microsoft Office), and the product is free to download, use, and distribute. If one has mastered the use of Microsoft Office, it is easy to transfer that learning to OpenOffice. This column, for example, is the first writing I have done using this software. The process was absolutely seamless as I transitioned from Microsoft Word. Explore it on your own and then introduce your teachers to it. Help them help future students and social agencies save money on software. It is quite possible to perform the statistical analysis tasks mentioned in the discussion above using this software.

5. Finally, by learning to rely more on open source software and free Internet based tools, we will all be developing knowledge and skills that can easily be shared with clients to empower them. High-priced office suites of software are not always available to everyone. Clients armed with OpenOffice can present themselves in more effective ways.

So, as Crosby, Stills, and Nash urged us in 1970, "You, of tender years, can't know the fears that your elders grew by. And so please help them with your youth. They seek the truth before they can die." The process of generations teaching each other important lessons is a strong dynamic in social work education. Teach your Teachers.

Send me your reactions, thoughts and ideas: Doc.Smith@hawaii.edu

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