room and begun to blur the distinctions between traditional and distance education (Miller & King, 2003; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Young (2002) concludes that "the convergence of classroom and online education is the single greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today" (p. A33).

Given this recent trend toward the merging of Internet-based and traditional education, it is not surprising that a new model of education is emerging that aims to purposefully integrate or blend elements of both. The goal of such courses and programs is to take full advantage of the benefits of each platform (i.e., online and face-to-face) in order to provide an educational opportunity that can promote student learning better than can either platform alone (Arabasz, Boggs, & Baker, 2003; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Courses and programs that combine Internet-based and traditional education components are often referred to as *hybrid*, *Web-enhanced*, *mixed mode*, or *blended* (Miller & King, 2003). Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) advocate for the use of the term *blended*, as it highlights the goal of such an approach to balance, or find harmony in, the combination of face-to-face and online methods or platforms for learning.

Blended courses are not simply traditional courses with added technology components (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Picciano, 2006). Instead, blended learning refers to "courses that combine face-to-face classroom instruction with online learning and reduced classroom contact hours" (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004, p. 2). Blended learning aims to reach beyond the potential of each individual approach (face-to-face/online) to create a new "whole" and transform both the structure and method to teaching and learning. In other words, blended learning endeavors to purposefully and seamlessly integrate online and traditional learning in order to create a distinct, new approach with its own merits (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007; Picciano, 2006). Therefore, blended learning represents a new educational paradigm (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) summarize the essence, potential, and challenge of blended learning as follows:

> Blended learning is both simple and complex. At its simplest, blended learning is the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences. There is considerable intuitive appeal to the concept of integrating the strengths of [these two platforms]. . . . At the same time, there is considerable complexity in its implementation with the challenge of virtually limitless design possibilities and applicability to so many contexts. . . . The real test of blended learning is the effective integration of the two [platforms]. . . . Blended learning is inherently about rethinking and redesigning the teaching and learning relationship. . . . It is not enough to deliver old content in a new medium. (pp. 96–97)

In this way, blended learning involves the reconceptualization and redesign of a course or program for delivery in a blended environment (Dziuban et al., 2004; Garrison &

Kanuka, 2004). According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008), this process involves both the fundamental rethinking of course design to maximize student engagement and the thoughtful integration of face-to-face and online learning. Thus, a major challenge of blended learning is determining the appropriate mixture of face-to-face and online components for a course—that is, what and how to combine class time with online learning (Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006). There is no one formula for designing blended courses; in fact, blended learning designs vary widely depending on the nature of the course content, the audience or students, the goals of the course, the instructor, and the technology available (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003; Vaughan, 2007).

Whereas finding the effective blend of face-to-face and online components may be challenging, using a combination of both may be a more effective way of meeting student needs than using traditional or online learning alone (Gonzales & Sujo de Montes, 2001; Trindade et al., 2000). Taking advantage of the strengths of both traditional and online education can provide significant opportunities to promote student learning. For example, a blended course can incorporate both face-to-face discussions and Internet discussion forums. Face-to-face discussions are spontaneous, can create energy and enthusiasm, build relationships, and cultivate a sense of community in the classroom (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), while Internet-based discussion forums can offer scheduling flexibility, promote interactivity, and foster community building. Online forums can also provide "a permanent record and expand time; as such, discussions are often more thoughtful, reasoned, and supported by evidential sources. . . . [They also] provide opportunity for students to learn in written form" (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 99).

Blended courses can benefit both distance and on-campus students by reducing the need to commute to campus while also providing flexible opportunities to participate in the traditional classroom (Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006). In addition, the use of multiple modalities in blended learning designs recognizes diverse learning styles among students. Carman (2002) states that people are not single-method learners and tend to perform better when they have a mix of modalities and methods for learning. In short, the successful combination of online and traditional components can provide educational opportunities that engage diverse learners, are self-directed and flexible, reduce isolation and promote community among students, and achieve high levels of student satisfaction and learning outcomes (Ausburn, 2004; Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2006; Vaughan, 2007).

Blended learning is widely used today in higher education institutions and continues to grow across North America (Cook, Owston, & Garrison, 2004; Dziuban et al., 2004). In a study of more than 1,000 American institutions of higher education, Allen et al. (2007) found that 55% offered at least one blended course. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) predict that "it is inevitable that campus-based higher education institutions will adopt blended learning approaches in a significant way" (p. 104). However, social work has yet to begin to purposefully and systematically explore blended learning as a distinct educational

approach with its own merits and potential for education. In fact, a search of the Social Work Abstracts article database found no studies with titles referring to blended or hybrid courses or programs.

Online and Blended Learning in Social Work

Like the rest of higher education, social work education has seen a trend of increasing use of technology and online learning in the delivery of social work courses and programs, particularly in the last decade (Harris & Parrish, 2006; Ouellette, Westhius, Marshall, & Chang, 2006). Courses in undergraduate and graduate social work education are increasingly being developed and implemented partly or fully online for a wide range of courses. These include: research (Frey & Faul, 2005; Hisle-Gorman & Zuravin, 2006), generalist social work practice (Ouellette et al., 2006; Petracchi, Mallinger, Engel, Rishel, & Washburn, 2005), social work history (Faux & Black-Hughes, 2000), field education (Birkenmaier et al., 2005; Maidment, 2006), gerontology (Sidell, 2006), diversity (Hylton, 2006), social policy (Roberts-DeGennaro & Clapp, 2005), child welfare (Bellefeuille, 2006; Rice-Green & Dumbrill, 2005), addictions (Harris & Parrish, 2006), administration (Freddolino & Knaggs, 2005), crisis intervention (Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006), mental health (Knowles, 2001), and ethics (Biggerstaff, 2005).

The Use of Technology in Social Work

Despite their recent growth, the use of technology and online learning in social work is not without controversy. Supporters argue that in order to thrive in an increasingly technological society, social work must take the lead in developing new models of practice and education that incorporate technology while still promoting its mission and values (e.g., Cummins & Hamilton, 2000; Harris & Parrish, 2006). On the other hand, skeptics cite various concerns about the use of technology in social work practice and education, such as minimizing the importance of meaningful human interaction and increasing student isolation (e.g., Collins, Gabor, Coleman, & Ing, 2002). In particular, some literature has cited a prevailing professional doubt as to whether social work practice skills can be effectively taught via technology and the Internet (Ouellette et al., 2006; Petracchi et al., 2005; Siebert et al., 2006).

Perhaps as a result of this debate about the use of technology in social work, the profession has been a late adopter of online learning. Hansen, Resnick, & Galea (2002) note that social work education has lagged far behind other disciplines in exploring the use of computers for educational purposes. Siebert et al. (2006) add that social work educators have been slow to adopt Internet-based instruction and that social work literature and research in the area are scarce prior to the year 2000.

The Potential of Blended Learning in Social Work

Concerns about the appropriateness and effectiveness of using technology-based education for preparing students for a person-centered discipline have likely stood in the way of our profession fully embracing online learning as an approach to social work education. Blended learning proposes that we do

not have to "choose" between online and face-to-face learning and provides us instead with new options and opportunities to purposefully use and combine the best of both approaches to suit particular educational goals. Blended learning thus represents a new approach to social work education that may address at least some of our concerns about online learning, such as the lack of face-to-face contact with students. Blended learning may be the vehicle that allows us to provide students the increased flexibility, accessibility, and depth of learning offered by Internet-based education, while at the same time keeping what we value most about face-to-face educational opportunities for our professional education.

Social work education has used and continues to use online learning to supplement traditional social work courses. However, blended learning is neither the appending or "tacking" of one learning platform (online-/face-to-face) or approach to another, nor merely a stepping stone in our transition to online learning (Allen et al., 2007; Picciano, 2006). Blended learning is emerging as a distinct new approach for higher education, and it is time for us to take the next step to more fully, systematically, and purposefully explore what the potential of blended approaches to social work education may be. The challenge for social work is to explore what blends of face-to-face and online education best promote learning for different courses, students, instructors, contexts, and educational goals.

Along with exploring the potential of blended learning through the delivery of such courses and programs, research in the area of blended learning is critical for assessing the effectiveness of these educational opportunities to offer students rich, meaningful, accessible, and flexible learning experiences. However, such evaluative research is not without challenges. Recommendations for research in the area of blended learning are provided here following a discussion of critical issues, challenges, and lessons to be learned from research in the area of distance education.

Evaluating Blended Learning

Reviews of existing studies in the area of distance education have found various limitations in their research methods, including biased and/or small samples, methodological flaws, improper measures of outcomes, and the use of instruments with questionable reliability and validity (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999; Zhao et al., 2005). Social work research evaluating both distance and traditional education has faced similar criticisms (Garcia & Floyd, 2002; Moore, 2004).

An additional concern in assessing the effectiveness of distance education is that the majority of existing research focuses on individual classes rather than programs (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). A major implication of the focus on individual courses is that these vary widely in areas such as content, learner characteristics, instructor characteristics, and delivery methods or tools. Such factors may contribute to differences in the results and outcomes found in distance education studies and limit the ability to make generalizations or comparisons across studies (Zhao et al., 2005).

These issues with existing research in the area of distance education highlight the need for research in the area of blended learning to

address current challenges in educational research and to move beyond comparisons with traditional education.

Beyond Comparisons with Face-to-Face Programs

Research to date in the area of distance education, including online learning, has focused mostly on the relative effectiveness of distance and traditional education in areas such as student learning outcomes and satisfaction (Head, Lockee, & Oliver, 2002). However, it is unclear whether comparisons between distance programs and equivalent face-to-face programs are appropriate or useful. Mehrotra et al. (2001) point out the lack of empirical research supporting the outcomes of traditional instruction and propose that the use of traditional education as a benchmark for determining the effectiveness of distance education may thus be inappropriate.

A related concern is the question of comparability between distance and on-campus students. Some studies comparing distance and traditional students have found learners to be significantly different on demographic variables such as age, full-time versus part-time student status, and hours of work, and have suggested that these factors may be related to outcome differences between distance and face-to-face students (e.g., Dalton, 2001; Potts & Hagan, 2000). Some researchers openly call for a stop to comparisons between distance and traditional programs and propose that research should instead focus on evaluating and improving distance programs in order to make them more effective learning experiences (Head et al., 2002; Huff, 2000; Miller et al., 2003).

An associated and emerging argument for the need of distance education studies to focus beyond comparisons with traditional education relates to the evolving understanding of both distance education and effective teaching and learning. There appears to be a growing acknowledgment in the literature that the effectiveness of a course or program is more a consequence of its design rather than its platform of delivery and that distance education or technology is not a teaching method itself, but rather a tool or approach that facilitates the implementation of a teaching strategy (Mehrotra et al., 2001; Miller & King, 2003).

Zhao et al. (2005) add that the state of the distance education literature of *no significant difference* between platforms has provided little guidance for distance education practice and has also led to a call to discontinue this line of research and move beyond comparison studies to a new paradigm of research in distance education. Within this new research paradigm, Cohen (2002, 2003) suggests various areas for evaluation of distance education programs or courses, including the processes of teaching and learning, the instructor, the student, implementation factors, and technology use. Lockee, Moore, & Burton (2002) recommend that the evaluation of distance education include student performance or learning outcomes, implementation concerns such as student support, and other faculty and student factors such as faculty preparedness and faculty-student interaction.

Implications for Research on Blended Learning

Given the state of the research in the area of distance education, it is proposed here that

research on the effectiveness of blended learning needs to focus beyond comparisons with traditional education to exploring the most effective approaches, tools, technologies, and blends to deliver social work education. General areas of research for assessing and advancing knowledge of blended learning environments include instructors and their teaching, students and their learning, and technology-related factors.

Instructor factors and factors relating to the process of teaching, including teaching methods and approaches, are important areas for distance education research (Cohen, 2002, 2003; Head et al., 2002). Blended learning requires course reconceptualization and redesign, as well as the mastery of skills for teaching in both online and face-to-face environments (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Kaleta, Skibba, & Joosten, 2007). Research on the processes and factors relating to training, support, and recognition of instructors teaching blended courses is important both for the effective design and delivery of such courses and for the recruitment and retention of faculty to teach these courses (Howell, Saba, Lindsay, & Williams, 2004; Lockee et al., 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Cohen (2002; 2003) suggests that student factors and factors relating to the process of learning also constitute important areas for research. These include student learning (e.g., learning needs, outcomes), satisfaction, and experiences as well as the skills and needs of students for training and support in blended courses and programs (Cohen, 2002; Fredolino & Knaggs, 2005; Miller et al., 2003).

Undoubtedly, technology plays a major role in the future of blended learning and is therefore an important area of focus for blended learning research. Factors relating to technology that affect teaching and learning in blended environments include the purposeful selection, combination, and use of delivery platforms (i.e., face-to-face and online learning) and technologies in the design and implementation of blended learning. Other potential areas of study include access to technology, technological problems, and the potential of technology to facilitate different types of learning (Cohen, 2002, 2003; Harris & Parrish, 2006; Lockee et al., 2002).

Conclusion

Distance education and online learning have proliferated in recent years as social work has started to explore their potential for meeting the needs of a changing student population and an increasingly technological society. Whereas there is arguably still much skepticism and fear in social work about the need or appropriateness of using technology and distance education, there seems to be an increasing acknowledgment that social work needs to adapt and evolve in order to survive and to thrive as a profession in the new millennium. Thus, it is critical that our profession continues to explore and evaluate new ways to effectively deliver social work education in a changing world. Blended learning represents one such new approach that warrants further exploration in social work education.

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