FIELD INSTRUCTORS AND ONLINE TRAINING: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY

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Despite field placement being the signature pedagogy of the social work profession, little research exists regarding methods for training field instructors. This study captures their perceptions regarding the use of online training. An online survey of 642 field instructors from 4 universities produced 208 responses. Less than 4% rejected the idea entirely, 14% responded they "would probably not participate," another 50% said they "might participate," and 32% indicated that they "definitely would" participate. Respondents reported extensive use of various Internet communication tools and displayed comfort with computing skills. Our findings challenge assumptions about social workers' reluctance to use online technology and suggest that online training programs are a viable option for field instructors. Implications for creating online programs are presented.

"IF FIELD EDUCATION is truly a central piece of social work education, it would seem that the profession needs to better understand field instructors" (Rohrer, Smith, & Peterson, 1992, p. 369).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has identified field placement as the "signature pedagogy" of the profession (CSWE, 2008). According to Shulman (2005), signature pedagogies "form habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of the hand" (p. 59). The field instructor–student relationship requires a pedagogy that is not solely supervisory; rather it is a combination of teaching, supervision, and social work technique (Hendricks, Finch, & Franks, 2005). However, relatively little research has been done in social work education to determine an efficient means of training these field instructors about their role in educating students (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006).

A national survey of field placement directors brought to light concerns regarding the lack of resources available to provide training,

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wide variation in content of training, and difficulty in attracting agency-based field instructors to campus-based training (McChesney, 1998). Indeed, time constraints related to budget cuts within the agencies in which students are placed have been associated with a decrease in availability of field instructors (Globerman & Bogo, 2003; Knight, 2001). No studies have yet been undertaken to determine the field instructors' preferred manner of delivery of that orientation and in-service training.

One possible solution involves the use of online training. Other disciplines have embraced online training, and previous research has identified many motives for using such technologies: being accessible anytime and anywhere (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006), facilitating peer-to-peer interactions (Edwards & Huff, 2001; Frey, Faul, & Yankelov, 2003), and providing immediately useful knowledge (Charles & Mamary, 2002; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

Moore (2003) found that social work faculty often felt their online classes were less effective than face-to-face classes. York (2008) related a historical inclination of social work educators to perceive online instruction as less valuable than traditional classroom models. Yet social work programs have, with some resistance, begun to engage in using new instructional technologies (Kolar, Reeser, & Conroy, 2003; Krueger & Stretch, 2000; Moore, 2003; Padgett & ConceiáÖo-Runlee 2000; York, 2008). For example, the use of online communication for students, along with their field instructors, has resulted in high levels of satisfaction regarding this more efficient means of communication (Wolfson, Marsom, & Magnuson, 2005). When social work programs have provided coursework online, both students and faculty have responded positively to the medium (Cascio & Gasker, 2001; McFall & Freddolino, 2000; Potts & Hagan, 2003; Van Soest, Canon, & Grant, 2000). Yet these studies have involved online provision of instruction to students, not to field instructors.

Professional concern for the limited research related to the best methods for training field instructors (Raskin, 1994; Wayne et al., 2006) and particular research about the field instruction experience (Bedard, 1998; Garner, 2001; McChesney, 1998; Short, 2001) has been expressed. Considering the results of efforts by other professions (e.g., health care) to research the practicality of providing training to practitioners via the Internet (Charles & Mamary, 2002), this exploratory study measured field instructors' willingness to participate and perceived obstacles and benefits to their willingness to participate in online training.

Research Methods

An exploratory study of field instructors' perceived advantages and disadvantages of online training was conducted using a Web-based survey. Four public universities' CSWE accredited programs (including three BSW and three MSW departments) within one Midwestern state cooperated in the survey. Each department offers local and distant field instruction sites. The census of 642 field instructors having e-mail accounts were e-mailed an invitation to participate in the survey. Two reminder invitations were sent over a 2-week period, resulting in a study sample

of 208 field instructors (31% response rate).

A survey instrument was created to measure participant demographics, perception of personal skills with technology, willingness to participate, and perceived obstacles and perceived advantages of online training in field instruction. Quantitative instrument items were written as Likert-type and fill-in questions, and qualitative items were written as open-ended questions. Content validity was supported by a review of a panel of experts, and the instrument was pilot tested by six field instructors to assess time for completion and clarity of the instrument items.

Two research questions guided the data analysis: (1) To what extent are field instructors willing to participate in online instruction?, and (2) To what extent do demographic variables, perceived obstacles, and perceived advantages of online instruction influence their willingness to participate?

All quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, whereby the Likert scale data was assumed to be interval level (Ravid, 2000), and standard descriptive statistics of central tendency and variability were measured. Subsequently, multiple independent variables on the instrument items were combined into constructs when an analysis of internal consistency (Chronbach's alpha, >.7) verified the interrelatedness of the independent items. The relationship between willingness to participate and all of the other variables (i.e., independent) was measured by correlation analysis, using Spearman's rho (r_s) because the dependent variable was ordinal (Weinbach & Grinnell, 2004). All responses to open-ended questions were grouped and reported by analysis of common themes (Patton, 2002).

A key strength of this research is that we surveyed field instructors directly, as opposed to earlier studies which used surveys of field directors (e.g., McChesney, 1998). Three potential limitations to generalizability of findings to other field instructors were identified: focus in one Midwestern state, invitations issued only to field instructors with known valid e-mail addresses, and potential bias of voluntary participation favoring the technologically savvy field instructors.

Findings

Demographic Variables

Data revealed the group of respondents represented a heterogeneous group of social workers. Respondents varied greatly by age (25–76 years, mean=46, *SD*=11.5); years of practice experience (0–37 years, mean=14.8, *SD*=8.8); years of experience as a field instructor (0–35 years, mean=6.97, *SD*=6.69); number of training events attended (0–20, mean=2.6, *SD*=2.87); and distance traveled to attend on-campus training (0–150 miles one way, mean=28.48, *SD*=26.30). They reported several fields of practice: clinical (27.9%), family and children's services (17.3%), school (13%), health care (12.5%), community organization (10.6%), and "other" (18.7%). None of these variables were found to correlate with their willingness to participate.

Respondent Participation

The first research question regarding the extent of field instructor willingness to participate in

online training was asked directly with the survey question: "If the university offered its field instructor in-service training via the Internet, would you choose to participate in it?" Choices provided for their responses were "No, I would not participate," "There is little chance I would participate," "I might participate," and "Yes, I would definitely participate." The most important finding of the study is that the majority of field instructors indicated either "yes" or "I might participate" in online training (see Table 1). Only seven field instructors indicated that they would not consider participating in online training.

The field instructors were also asked to rate their interest in features that might be used in a training website (see Table 2). The availability of documents directly related to supervising the field placement was the most highly rated feature, and accessing articles related to topics regarding the field instructor's specific concerns was the next. Communication features between peers and with the field liaison or field director were of lower interest, with just over half indicating a significant or moderate interest in using a discussion board, and few stating the same about using a chat room. Indeed, use of a chat room was the least desirable of all features with about one-third indicating that they had "no interest" in it.

The construct "adult learning preferences" was created as a composite variable of these online features, and a significant correlation between adult learning preferences and willingness to participate in online training (r_s=.419, p=.000, n=204) was identified. Respondents' interest in accessing documents

TABLE 1. Willingness to Participate in Training via the Internet

Response	Frequency	Percentage
No	7	3.4
Probably not	30	14.4
I might	104	50.0
Yes	67	32.2

TABLE 2. Online Features of Interest

	No Interest		Little Interest		Moderate Interest		Significant Interest		
Feature	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*M*
Access documents	7	3.4	13	6.3	66	31.9	121	58.5	3.45
Access articles	8	3.8	19	9.1	68	32.7	110	52.9	3.37
Discussion board	35	16.8	52	25.0	84	40.4	36	17.3	2.58
Chat room	70	33.7	83	39.9	35	16.8	18	8.7	2.00

and articles and in discussion boards was a moderately positive indicator of their willingness to participate in online training.

Impact of Various Technology-Related Variables

Next we analyzed any connections between the field instructors' willingness to participate and two categories of technology related variables: technology access and individual versatility with technology.

Technology access was measured using two items: location and speed of access. Respondents reported ready access to technology with over 75% of the field instructors accessing the Internet from both home and work. A majority (81%) of respondents also reported high-speed access through cable (43%) or other broadband (38%) Internet connections. Slower dial-up modems were used by 3% of respondents, and only 15% did not know what kind of Internet connection they used. Correlation analysis (Spearman's rho) demonstrated that access to and type of Internet connection used did not impact field instructors' willingness to participate in online instruction (r_s=.110, p=.113, N=208, and (r_s–.105, p=.131, N=208, respectively, *ns*).

Familiarity With Technology

Familiarity with technology was measured in two ways: perception of personal computer skills and frequency of use of computer technologies. Perception of personal computer skills was measured as field instructors were also asked to rate their own computer and Internet skills (Table 3). The great majority of the field instructors endorsed "strongly agree" for positively worded statements regarding their computer and Internet skills. Further analysis of inter-item correlation led to the creation of a composite variable "computer/Internet skills."

TABLE 3. Self-Rating of Computer/Internet Skills

	Strongly Disagree		Slightly Disagree		Slightly Agree		Strongly Agree		
Feature	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***M***
I am easily able to send & receive documents attached to e-mail	2	1.0	5	2.4	27	13.0	172	82.7	3.79
I am comfortable navigating the Internet	0	0.0	7	3.4	46	22.1	154	74.0	3.71
I am comfortable with downloading files (articles, music, etc.) from the Internet	1	0.5	8	3.8	49	23.6	150	72.1	3.67
I can easily read professional articles or literature online	2	1.0	9	4.3	53	25.5	144	69.2	3.63
I have excellent computer skills	1	0.5	7	3.4	75	36.1	125	60.1	3.56
I am easily able to copy & paste information from a website into a document	10	4.8	23	12.0	38	18.3	133	63.9	3.43

Computer/Internet skills were weakly correlated with willingness to participate in online training (r_s=.270, p=.000, n=203). Respondents who perceived themselves as familiar with computers were somewhat more likely to be willing to participate in online training.

Familiarity with technology was also measured by respondents' reported use of four different types of computer technology: frequency of e-mail use, belonging to an e-mail group, participation in an online class, and participation in discussion boards and/or chat rooms. The vast majority of field instructors reported actively using e-mail (84% more than once a day), and 66.8% belonged to an e-mail users group. Neither variable was found to correlate with willingness to participate in online instruction. More than 45% had taken at least one online course, and a surprising 17.8% had taken four or more of such courses. There was a weak positive correlation between willingness to participate in online training and number of online courses a respondent had previously participated in (r_s=.139, p=.046, N=208).

The majority of respondents reported not having a history of participation in discussion boards and chat rooms; only 8.3% participated in discussion boards at least weekly, and only 1% did the same for chat rooms. A distinguishing quality of the few who did have weekly experience using discussion boards (8%) and experience with a chat room (1%) was the weak positive correlation between each behavior and willingness to participate in online training (r_s=.243, p=.000, n=205, and r_s=.244, p=.000, n=207, respectively).

Influence of External Factors

We also analyzed what influence two external factors—agency support levels and the availability of continuing education credits for Internet-based training—might have on field instructors' interest in participating in online training. Most revealed their agencies were "very" supportive of their time training as field instructors (56.8%), and that this level of support had not recently changed (82.4%). There was no correlation of either level of agency support or change in agency support (r_s=.029, p=.680, n=206, and r_s=.000, p=.995, n=201, respectively, *ns*) with willingness to participate in online training.

The majority (66.8%) of field instructors reported that receiving continuing education credits would increase their interest in online instruction. There was a positive correlation between willingness to participate in online training and availability of continuing education credit (r_s=.159, p=.023, n=204).

Influence of Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Instruction

Previous research has identified a number of advantages and disadvantages of online instruction, and we were interested to see what impact field instructors' perceptions of these factors had on their willingness to participate in online training.

Nearly 80% of field instructors felt that being able to participate in training from any location was a very (58.2%) or somewhat (21.6%) appealing advantage, whereas more than 70% felt the same about the ability to work anytime and at their own pace.

The greatest disadvantage identified by the field instructors included having just over 50% stating "significant concern" (24%) or "moderate concern" (27.4%) with the lack of a face-to-face presenter. Slightly more than 45% expressed similar concerns regarding no face-to-face time with their peers, and about one-third were concerned with the time required and the need to use a chat room. On the other hand, the vast majority offered "no concern" or "little concern" about not going to campus (84.6%), their computer skills (83.6%), or connection speed (90%). Table 4 displays perceptions of potential disadvantages, as ranked from highest to lowest mean.

An interitem correlation of the three advantages revealed a Cronbach's alpha of .904, and thus a composite variable "Internet advantages" was created. For the disadvantages, two new variables were created: "social disadvantages" (Cronbach's alpha of .882) and "technical disadvantages" (Cronbach's alpha of .814).

There was a strong correlation between willingness to participate in online training and the composite variable "Internet advantages" (r_s=.609, p=.000, n=206). There was a negative correlation between willingness to participate in online training and both the social and technical disadvantage composite variables (r_s=–.447, p=.000, N=208, and r_s=–.395, p=.000, n=194, respectively).

Open-Ended Responses

Field instructors were asked for comments, and 76 responded. The majority of negative comments referred to loss of face-to-face communication (n=21). One respondent commented: "Part of what I enjoy is the face-to-face interaction with faculty and field instructors. This is an opportunity to personally network that would be lost." The general feeling that online settings lose both richness and warmth was captured by the response: "There is more to observe and absorb in a live classroom. I would be more motivated and inspired by a live classroom."

TABLE 4. Perceptions Regarding Disadvantages of Online Training

	No Concern at All		A Little Concern		Moderate Concern		Significant Concern		
Feature	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***M***
No face-to-face presenter	43	20.7	58	27.9	57	27.4	50	24.0	2.55
No face-to-face peers	52	25.0	61	29.3	45	21.6	50	24.0	2.45
Time required	57	27.4	74	35.6	46	22.1	30	14.4	2.24
Chat room	79	38.0	56	26.9	49	23.6	23	11.1	2.08
Discussion board	91	43.8	62	29.8	37	17.8	16	7.7	1.89
Not go to campus	108	51.9	68	32.7	23	11.1	8	3.8	1.67
Computer skills	128	61.5	46	22.1	22	10.6	5	2.4	1.52
Connection speed	143	68.8	44	21.2	13	6.3	5	2.4	1.41

There were also concerns about the amount of time online training would take (n=14); One respondent noted: "I would hate to spend more time on the computer than I already do!! I already spend way too much time on the computer." Another commented, "Lack of motivation—online instruction strings out over a longer period of time and gets pushed aside when competing with other more pressing priorities."

Computer skills and security issues were raised (n=5), with one respondent noting: "It probably would be fine, but I have never used these systems so there is a certain [amount] of concern due to the unknown of how to use them." Another commented, "Would it be a secure site? Would information be forwardable? How to maintain confidentiality?" A few field instructors (n=3) addressed the desire to be on campus: "I enjoy going to campus and interacting with faculty. Online would be a good option if I were unable to attend a scheduled, on-campus training."

Positive comments often included brief remarks, such as: "Would love to participate in a pilot" and "GREAT idea!" Some respondents (n=8) specifically addressed issues of time and distance, for instance: "I have a very busy schedule and driving to [deleted city] or even [deleted university name] disrupts my schedule. I enjoy working with students, but any time I can get the training online is a bonus." Another observed, "This would be an amazing help, because I wouldn't be worried about what I'm missing because I can't make it to the 'land-based' trainings." A final field instructor noted, "While I have attended an orientation with each of the Universities, going every year seems redundent [sic] and time consuming—it's nice to visit, the coffee's great, but I really don't have the time."

Implications

Overall, our study brings into question prior assumptions about social workers' reluctance to use technology (Moore, 2003; York, 2008). The majority of our respondents perceived themselves as having good skills with computers and the Internet. They expressed confidence in their level of skills necessary for participation in online training (i.e., downloading documents, navigating a website, and handling e-mail attachments). The vast majority of respondents had Internet connections fast enough to handle online training, and nearly half of the field instructors had previously taken one or more online courses or workshops.

Because this survey was administered via e-mail, it is likely that our respondents represent more technologically inclined social workers. Even so, an unexpected number of field instructors indicated either "yes" or "I might participate" in online training. Despite such interest, it is important to note that some respondents did voice concern about the loss of face-to-face contact with their training presenter and their peers.

Field directors considering online training may want to involve their participants in interactive communications to reduce this loss of interaction. In our study, field instructors reported engaging in frequent e-mail communication, but few engaged in other online communications. Those who did were far more comfortable with discussion boards than chat rooms. Interaction between participants

and the training presenter may be fostered by facilitating e-mail between participants, or providing a discussion board.

Although our respondents did not indicate that driving distance to training on campus was a concern, they did identify that a benefit of online training was the ability to participate at a flexible location and time. A specific concern of earlier studies was the erosion of agency support for field instructors (Globerman & Bogo, 2003; Wayne et al., 2006). Our study differs from these in that the majority of field instructors reported their agencies to be supportive of training. However, some responses to the open-ended questions described an advantage of online training not interfering with work schedules. Further research may be useful in resolving this apparent inconsistency.

Respondents valued website features that utilized concepts of adult learning styles, such as seeking information to solve an immediate problem and engaging with peers in order to learn (Knowles, 1980; Merriam et al., 2007). Specific interests included access to forms for administering the field placement, articles on issues of immediate use to their supervisory concerns, and ability to communicate with field placement directors and other field instructors using a discussion board.

In closing, it is also important to note that our study is valuable as much for its method as its actual findings. Through the use of e-surveys, future direct studies of the attitudes and concerns of field instructors could be undertaken with relative ease. This is vital, given the role field instructors play within social work's signature pedagogy. We need to know more about their perceptions and how best to support their work in educating future social workers.

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