

Collaborative Online Teaching: A Model for Gerontological Social Work Education

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Abstract

Social work students and faculty are increasingly embracing online education and collaborative teaching. Yet models to support these activities have not been adequately developed. This paper describes how a team of instructors developed, delivered, and evaluated an undergraduate gerontological social work course using a collaborative online teaching and learning model. Our findings suggest that the course model served to: facilitate undergraduate students' use of higher order learning (reflection, reflexivity and application of knowledge to practice), reduce ageism, and provide gerontology training to undergraduate social work students across a large geographical area.

Résumé

Les étudiants en travail social et le personnel enseignant adoptent de plus en plus l'enseignement en ligne et l'enseignement collaboratif. Pourtant, les modèles pour soutenir ces activités ne sont pas suffisamment développés. Cet article décrit comment une équipe d'instructeurs a développé, livré, et évalué un cours de premier cycle de gérontologie en travail social en utilisant un modèle d'enseignement collaboratif et d'apprentissage en ligne. Nos résultats suggèrent que le modèle de cours a servi à : faciliter chez les étudiants de premier cycle, l'utilisation d'un apprentissage d'ordre supérieur (réflexion, réflexivité, et application des connaissances à la pratique), réduire l'âgisme, et fournir une formation en gérontologie aux étudiants de premier cycle en travail social dans l'ensemble d'une vaste région géographique.

Context

Across North America, the current and projected growth in the aging population will require trained professionals, including social workers, to address the needs of vulnerable older adults at unprecedented levels (Lun, 2012). Social workers with gerontological skills and training are needed to fulfill critical roles in meeting increased health and social care demands (Hick, 2010). It is estimated, for example, that the requirement for geriatric social workers in the United States increased by 45% between 2011 and 2015 (Hartford Institute, 2011). Although social work students should "graduate with foundational knowledge and skills to work effectively with older adults" (Hooyman & Peter, 2006, p. 9), they have typically shown limited interest in the field (Cummings, Kim, Galambos, & Wilson, 2006; Gonclaves, 2009). In addition, social work education programs have been criticized for providing insufficient levels of gerontological content to social work students (Hirst, Lane, & Stares, 2012). Indeed, in many schools of social work, faculty members lack the requisite knowledge to teach gerontological content (Webb, Chonody, Ranzijn, Bryan, & Owen, 2015). Thus, social workers are graduating from social work education programs lacking the specific competencies required to practice effectively with older adults (Lun, 2012; Webb et al., 2015). Over time, a recurring cycle of students, faculty, and practitioners lacking competence in geriatric social work practice has been perpetuated (Webb et al., 2015). However, the current demographic scenario in which older adults are the most rapidly growing cohort in the North American population has

created an imperative for this cycle to be halted (Christensen, Doblhammer, Rau, & Vaupel, 2009; Gonclaves, 2009). The objective of this paper is to describe how our instructional team at the University of Calgary developed, delivered and evaluated an elective undergraduate gerontological social work course using an innovative model of collaborative online teaching and learning to address a lack of geriatric social work content in our university's undergraduate social work education program.

Essential first steps to rectifying the issue of social work students being unprepared for gerontological practice include increasing their awareness of the aging population (Lun, 2012) and promoting positive attitudes toward aging (Gonclaves, 2009). Research has demonstrated that increased knowledge about gerontology is paralleled by decreased ageism and reduced anxiety associated with aging among university students (Allan & Johnson, 2008; Boswell, 2012). Studies have indicated that social work students may hold inaccurate beliefs about aging and older adults. However, when these assumptions are dispelled and replaced with more positive and accurate perspectives, interest levels in careers focused on gerontology tend to increase (Boswell, 2012; Lun, 2012; Webb et al., 2015). Moreover, the provision of stand-alone gerontology courses has been shown to be sufficient to increase undergraduate students' capacities and interest in working with older adults (Bergel, 2006).

Collaborative Online Teaching Model

As the only faculty that offers a social work program leading to a baccalaureate degree in Alberta, Canada, the Faculty of Social Work (FSW) at the University of Calgary has a mandate to provide social work education throughout the province. Yet, at the time that our course was proposed, the FSW had not offered a dedicated gerontology course for several years. Thus, there was an urgent need for gerontological content that could be made accessible to students in the FSW's undergraduate programs across Alberta. In response, our team developed an elective course in gerontological social work. Given the province-wide educational mandate of the FSW, online delivery was determined to be the most suitable format for enabling access to the course for students across Alberta. In all, the team worked through four stages (team formation, course design, course delivery, and formal evaluation) of collaborative instructional design and delivery in order to bring the course to fruition.

Online Delivery

Online teaching and learning is a relatively new instructional method that is being increasingly embraced by students and faculty worldwide (Hash & Tower, 2010; Kurzman, 2013; Xu & Morris, 2007). The number of online university-level learners has increased dramatically over the past decade (Scribner-MacLean, & Miller, 2011). Online learning offers several "e-advantages", including reaching large numbers of students across geographic distance, increasing flexibility by enabling students to learn at times that are the most convenient for them, providing equal access for students with disabilities, and creating opportunities for building communities of practice (Kurzman, 2013; Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Moore, 2008). The advantages of group synergy, interactivity with instructors and peers, and financial savings (Hash & Tower, 2010), along with ease of storage, retrieval, and dissemination of course materials from portable devices, have been identified as additional benefits of online higher education (Fein & Logan, 2003; Kurzman, 2013; Scribner-MacLean & Miller, 2011). Online courses may especially appeal to students who live in rural areas, have families, work full or part-time while taking classes, or face other barriers to attending classes on campus (Kurzman, 2013; McAlister, 2013; Scribner-MacLean & Miller, 2011).

Social work education is undergoing a "paradigm shift" that involves embracing and valuing the online teaching and learning trend (O'Neil & Jensen, 2014). Evidence of this shift includes increasing the number of undergraduate social work courses being offered online (Kurzman, 2013; McAlister, 2013) such that online education is now considered a major part of the "academic landscape" in social work education (McAlister, 2013). Online delivery is recognized as an efficient and effective way to offer social work courses and has been evaluated as a "safe, inclusive, acceptable and accessible" instructional

design and delivery option (Walsh & Baynton, 2012, p. 148). Studies of the achievement of learning outcomes in online and face-to-face classrooms have found that both instructional modalities are equally effective in facilitating achievement of learning outcomes (Hylton, 2006; O'Neil & Jensen, 2014; Petracchi, Mallinger, Engel, Rishel, & Washburn, 2005).

Team Formation

The idea of assembling an instructional team to offer the course online via a collaborative team teaching arrangement was first proposed by a senior faculty member who saw the opportunity to develop and deliver a much needed undergraduate social work course in gerontology in Alberta. While collaborative teaching is an increasingly popular trend in higher education (Preves & Stephenson, 2009), currently, little research exists on collaborative teaching in an online environment (Scribner-MacLean & Miller, 2011).

The senior faculty member approached colleagues with research and practice backgrounds in gerontology to gauge their interest in working together to design and teach the course. Once the teaching team was assembled, we collaborated over the period of one year to develop, deliver, and evaluate the course. Since the social work education literature offered little guidance on how to engage in team teaching within social work (Zapf, Jerome, & Williams, 2011), the team consulted with library, instructional design, and e-learning specialists, who were able to provide useful advice for course planning. Through this consultation process, we identified the importance of creating coherence and integration among instructors and across course content. We viewed adherence to a consistent set of standards as a critical element for providing students with a high-quality, deep, and comprehensive learning experience (Landy & Anderson, as cited in Palmer, 2006; Xu & Morris, 2007).

Congruent with the best practices identified in the team teaching literature that emphasize the importance of working together in a highly collaborative manner, we functioned as a single teaching unit made up of five members (Landy & Anderson, as cited in Palmer, 2006; Walters & Misra, 2013; Zapf et al., 2011). By working as a team, we benefitted from senior faculty and collegial mentorship, engagement, and support throughout the process (Walters & Misra, 2013).

Central to the functioning of the team was our adherence to the feminist practice of sharing our knowledge, expertise, responsibility, and power (Colwill & Boyd, 2008). We designed the course to facilitate equitable workload division among the instructors and to present a cohesive instructional team to the students (Zapf et al., 2011). During the planning process, we further identified a shared interest in studying the experiences of students in the course and measuring their learning outcomes. Evaluation of newly developed online courses was encouraged in order to assess their effectiveness (Xu & Morris, 2007). Therefore, we secured institutional ethics approval and conducted a formal evaluation.

Course Design

The principles of social constructivist epistemology (Paily, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978; Woo & Reeves, 2007) were applied to the course design (Gulbrandsen, Walsh, Fulton, Azulai & Tong, 2015). In addition to an online introduction to the course and the instructors, the course consisted of five two-week modules: (a) Introduction to Gerontology; (b) Diversity in Aging; (c) Abuse of Older Adults; (d) Chronic Health Conditions in Aging and the Continuing Care System; and (e) End-of-life Care/Death and Dying. One instructor taught each module. Throughout the course, students were encouraged to become critical consumers of theories about aging and to apply a variety of theories of aging to their social work practice experiences, personal experiences, and case studies.

In designing the course, we established the following set of learning objectives.

Learners were expected to:

- Understand aging in the context of Canada and internationally;
- Discuss age related changes in biological and social functioning;

- Identify and describe psychosocial and sociological theories of aging;
- Identify the sources of societal ageism and its impact on the wellbeing of older adults;
- Articulate, expand, and reflect on one's own perspectives on older adults and the provision of services for older adults;
- Understand the heterogeneity of the older adult population in relationship to aging and the provision of care;
- Articulate the components of the continuing care system for older adults; and
- Develop an awareness of some specific challenges related to aging (chronic health problems, elder abuse, death and dying).

These objectives were communicated to students in the course outline and within the online environment.

Course Delivery

The course was delivered entirely online using the Desire2Learn (D2L) platform. As recommended by McAlister (2013), we incorporated both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) elements in the course. To ensure consistency in presentation ("look and feel") of the content (Xu & Morris, 2007), each module followed the same basic format or template consisting of the following four elements: (a) a pre-recorded lecture with slides and narration by an instructor; (b) a set of required and recommended readings; (c) a synchronous meeting and small group presentation; and (d) an asynchronous discussion board.

Synchronous meetings and small group presentations. The synchronous meeting times were established at the outset of the course and noted in the course outline and on the class calendar in D2L. Synchronous meetings provided time and space to discuss course content, format issues, and expectations. The group presentations also occurred during the synchronous meetings.

Assigning group presentations aligns with the social constructivist epistemology that underlies the instructional design of the course (Gulbrandsen et al., 2015). The group presentations were the culmination of an assignment that required each group of four or five students to work together to develop and share a presentation with the class in real-time via web conferencing. The use of group projects in online education is beneficial for encouraging collaboration and "co-construction of knowledge" among groups of learners (Lou & MacGregor, 2004, p. 419). Group projects have been found to increase collaboration, active participation, flexibility, and motivation among students in higher education (Koh & Hill, 2009; Roberts & McInerney, 2007). Furthermore, working collaboratively in small groups generates "favorable attitudes toward learning", while promoting the expansion of problem-solving skills and "social and intellectual development" (Lou & MacGregor, 2004, pp. 421-422). Ideally, student group members work together effectively and engage in peer mentoring and support through online dialogues and working sessions.

Assigning group projects in an online class carries risks similar to those in face-to-face settings including uneven distribution of tasks among group members, lack of productivity, miscommunication, interpersonal conflicts, and low quality final products (Koh & Hill, 2009). Importantly, efforts by course instructors to facilitate and monitor group collaboration may not significantly improve group performance (Lou & MacGregor, 2004). In light of this evidence, we took a hands-off approach to the group presentation assignment, allowing students to form their own groups and work together independently, with involvement from the instructors provided on an 'as requested' basis. Each group did consult with at least one instructor in order to finalize their presentation topic. The topics were required to be related to the content of one of the five course modules. This assignment was worth 25% of the final grade.

Asynchronous discussion boards. Asynchronous discussion boards are recognized as an effective teaching tool for facilitating interactivity and promoting active engagement with course materials among learners (Gulbrandsen et al., 2015; Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006; Wyss, Freedman, & Siebert,

2014). They also provide a unique opportunity for students to construct meaning by writing “themselves” into their developing understandings at their own pace, thus, allowing for thoughts to be fully formed before being shared (Wyss et al., 2014). Asynchronous discussions are recognized as a useful tool for eliciting thoughtful and complex contributions from students while allowing for timely and comprehensive interaction and feedback with other learners and instructors. In addition, discussion boards have been evaluated positively in prior research on social work student engagement (Barnett–Queen, Blair, & Merrick, 2005). For these reasons, we adopted asynchronous discussion boards as a central strategy to engage students with the course content, their instructors, and each other.

In each module, students engaged in an online dialogue based on their choice of one of three, open-ended, thought-provoking questions posed by the instructors. The instructors joined in the resultant discussions with the students and frequently commented on their posts and/or posed further questions to extend the dialogue and promote critical thinking. Postings were graded according to criteria that included meeting expectations for length and level of detail in the posts. The criteria were explained to students during the first week of class in order to guide them in providing optimal answers and maximize their participation in the discussions (Wyss et al., 2014).

In light of past research that demonstrates links between high degrees of instructor presence and student motivation to learn within online settings, the instructors sought to be active and “visible” within the online discussion board (Mandernach et al., 2006; Scribner–MacLean & Miller, 2011). Active instructor presence in online discussions creates the opportunity for instructors to demonstrate leadership and model appropriate interactions, as well as to set the tone of the online communications (Mandernach et al., 2006). Our emphasis on active instructor presence extended to our promptness in responding to students via email or Skype. This strategy served to create a “climate of open communication” among students and instructors (Mandernach et al., 2006, p. 251). Having a team of instructors available to respond to inquiries and provide feedback helped to ensure that students received timely responses (Scribner–MacLean & Miller, 2011).

Students were expected to provide a brief introduction of themselves in the discussion board within the first week of class. This introduction was worth 5% of the total grade in the course. Discussion board posts during each module were assessed for quality and timeliness, and were valued at 5% of the total grade per module. In total, the discussion board was worth 25% of the grade that students earned in the course.

Problem-based learning and case analysis. In the final assignment, we employed problem-based learning (PBL) to enable students to demonstrate their ability to synthesize and integrate their learning by applying it to a ‘real’ case (Gonclaves, 2009; Jennings, 2006; Majeski & Stover, 2007; Popil, 2011). As a pedagogical strategy, PBL facilitates knowledge acquisition while simultaneously encouraging the development of the skills necessary to reason critically, pose questions, analyze information, and communicate clearly and concisely (Duch, Groh, & Allen, 2001). Use of real-life case material helps to prepare students for professional practice within dynamic health and social care systems (Duch et al., 2001; Popil, 2011). Application of PBL begins with a problem grounded in an authentic and complex real-world situation (Duch et al., 2001). Thus, the cases used for the final assignment took the form of online videos and recent news items selected by the instructors. Web links to the case studies were provided to the students within the D2L platform. Each student selected a case study from a list of twenty options, thereby, allowing the student to tailor the assignment to his or her particular learning interests. This assignment was worth 35% of the final grade in the course.

Assessment

Grading in a collaboratively taught online course can be an area of potential confusion and concern for both students and instructors (Scribner–MacLean & Miller, 2011; Zapf et al., 2011). In order to prevent misunderstandings, we sought to be clear about how assignments would be graded from the outset (Zapf et al., 2011). We applied “mutually agreed-upon standards” during grading (Landy & Anderson, as cited in Palmer, 2006, n.p.). This process was facilitated by the development of grading rubrics that were

used to guide assessment of student learning and performance (Rochford & Borchert, 2011; Truemper, 2004). The rubrics made grading criteria explicit for learners, aided instructors in collaborative grading of assignments (Scribner–MacLean & Miller, 2011; Truemper, 2004), and served as a point of reference for all instructors when providing constructive feedback to students (Scribner–MacLean & Miller, 2011).

Each instructor marked the student's contribution to the discussion board and the small group presentations specific to the module the instructor had taught. Taking full advantage of our ability to work together as a team, we split into pairs to grade the case analyses. This division of labour made grading a less time consuming and isolating activity for the instructors, while the students benefited from the attention to detail and thoughtful feedback that they received on their assignments. Two instructors with, often, distinct perspectives had reviewed and marked each assignment (Scribner–MacLean & Miller, 2011).

Formal Evaluation

Given our team's interest in evaluating students' experiences of the course with a particular focus on how the course influenced their readiness to engage in social work practice with older adults, we employed a mixed methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) to conduct a design-based research project (Barab & Squire, 2004). The project consisted of the following: (a) pre- and post-test assessments of student knowledge; (b) content analysis of the online discussion board; and (c) thematic analysis of a focus group. This evaluation was conducted in addition to the standardized university teaching evaluation.

The team used two standardized psychometric tests to compare students' knowledge, values, and beliefs related to aging and social work practice before and after course completion. The data were entered into SPSS. Pre- and post-test scores were compared using paired t-tests.

All 30 students in the class completed both psychometric tests on D2L, the first at the outset of the course and the second after the final assignment for the course had been submitted for grading. Completion of the pre- and post-tests was a requirement of the course and comprised 10% of total grade (5% for each). The sample used for analysis consisted of the tests from the 27 students who provided informed consent to participate in the study.

The first of the two standardized measures was the revised version of the Fraboni Scale of Ageism (FSA; Fabroni, Salstone, & Hughes, 1990; Rupp, Vodanovich, & Crede, 2005), a 29-item, self-assessment instrument that utilizes a four-point Likert scale to assess cognitive and affective components of ageism (Allan & Johnson, 2008; Rupp et al., 2005). According to the developers, the FSA has adequate construct validity and reliability, with a Chronbach alpha score of .86 (Fabroni et al., 1990; Rupp et al., 2005). A sample item from the FSA states the following: "Old people complain more than other people do." Respondents rate their level of agreement with each statement ranging from 1–Strongly Disagree to 4–Strongly Agree. Possible scores range from 29 to 116, with higher scores indicating higher levels of ageism (Allan & Johnson, 2008).

The second standardized measure used was The Facts on Mental Health in Aging Quiz (FAMHQ; Palmore, 1998), a 25-item, multiple-choice questionnaire that assesses ageist biases in relation to cognitive functioning and mental health (Palmore, 2005; Van der Elst, Deschodt, Welsch, Milisen, & de Casterle, 2014). Respondents are required to select the one answer they think provides the most accurate response from a selection of four possible responses, or they may select a response of "don't know." For example, the first question in the FAMHQ reads as follows: "Severe mental illness among persons over sixty-five afflicts." Possible responses include the following: a. the majority; b. about half; c. about 15% to 25%; d. very few; or e. don't know. According to Palmore (2005), responses indicate a positive or negative bias toward older adults. By using the scoring guide to evaluate responses, a net bias score for each respondent is established. Essentially, the larger the number of correct responses provided, the less age-related bias a respondent is said to hold. Scores are calculated as a percentage with a total possible score of 100%. The reliability and validity of the FAMHQ has not been reported (Van der Elst et al., 2014).

Online discussion board posts were thematically analyzed using the constructivist grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006) in order to determine how new knowledge was constructed individually as well as collectively, and to better understand how the students demonstrated their engagement in critical reflection, reflexivity, and integration of personal and professional experiences with the course content (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Gulbrandsen et al., 2015; Morley & Dunstan, 2013). We used the term ‘reflexivity’ in a broad sense based on its various uses in the social work literature (D’Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007). Specifically, we understood reflexivity to refer to a “considered response” to environmental inputs that is applied to information processing, knowledge acquisition, and decision-making (D’Cruz et al., 2007). Reflexivity also involves critical awareness about knowledge, theory generation, and power relationships, as well as development of an understanding of the interrelationships among thoughts, feelings, and actions. Although reflexivity and critical reflection have much in common, we defined critical reflection as a social work practice skill with an “emancipatory element” that takes learning from a specific incident and generalizes it to other situations (D’Cruz et al., 2007). Among the key distinctions between the two terms is timing, with reflexivity occurring “in the moment” and critical reflection occurring after an incident has taken place (D’Cruz et al., 2007).

At the completion of the course, an optional web-based focus group interview was conducted to contextualize student learning and inform future course development. While all students in the class were invited to participate in the focus group, only three students chose to do so. Two trained MSW-student facilitators led the discussion with the aid of a nine-question structured field guide. The field guide included both reflective and future-orientated questions such as the following: “Will your learning in this course influence the way you will approach interacting with older adults and if so, how?” The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The course instructors were unaware of students’ decisions to participate or not in the focus group session. No data analysis took place until after all course assignments were graded and the grade appeals period had expired in order to ensure that the students’ informed decision and consent to participate did not influence grading.

Findings

The mean score on the FSA was 45.63 and 40.52 at pre- and post-test, respectively. The paired t-test on the FSA was statistically significant ($t = 3.204$, $p = .004$), indicating a positive shift in learner attitudes toward aging during the 13-week course.

Although the average correct score on the FAMHQ improved from 52.2% to 55.6% in pre- and post-test, respectively, this was not statistically significant ($t = -1.484$, $p = .150$). These scores are lower than the average score of 59% for undergraduate sociology and human behaviour students, established by Palmore (1988) during initial testing of the FAMHQ.

Thematic analysis of the online discussion board content revealed that students engaged in higher order learning (reflection, reflexivity and application of knowledge to practice) (Bay & Macfarlane, 2011; D’Cruz et al., 2007). Students offered both personal reactions to their learning and their personal reflections on oppressive or unfortunate circumstances that older adults contend with in everyday life. Learners frequently shared specific incidents and examples from their personal and professional experiences with older adults. One student shared this critical reflection:

My grandma was diagnosed with early onset dementia many years ago and it has progressively gotten worse...she lives for running (she even ran in the Boston marathon) and it would be devastating for her if she went into a care home and was told that she could no longer meet with her running club. Even if she got to the point that she was unable to physically run I know that she would love to talk about running and it would mean the world to her if a care home made a point of talking to her about running or had an activity around running. Such personalization of care is crucial for wellbeing.

In their reflections, students recognized the importance of empowerment and ethical considerations, such as self-determination for older adults, noting that the quality of older adults' lives could be compromised or diminished by a lack of autonomy. One student commented this way: "Practicing social work has helped me a lot in questioning who the expert really is and as far as end of life is concerned, I think I will be the expert on what's best for me, so I agree completely that I'm the one who should be making the decisions on medications, whether I want to continue the fight for life and for deciding who will advocate for me."

Reflecting on the course content also prompted learners to evaluate their skills, experiences, and knowledge, and to identify opportunities for future learning. This idea is illustrated by one student's comment:

Each individual's aging process is unique. In order to meet the varying needs, we need to be able to recognize individual differences, in order to build a helping relationship with our aging clients. As social workers we need to know more and more about different cultures and how to work with people from all over the world who may or may not have very different backgrounds than us. It is going to be a lot of continuous learning that's for sure!

Students also identified ways in which they could apply their new knowledge and awareness to social work practice with older adults, including engaging in social change and advocacy activities such as legislation reform, engaging in research, and developing prevention programs. One student suggested the following:

Social workers may advocate for a wide variety of changes within policy and programs within our communities. We may advocate for policy changes that would reflect a respect for diversity. In addition we may advocate for the provision of health initiatives within Aboriginal communities to prevent/offset the high numbers of diabetes and other health concerns and we may advocate for equality of services and benefits within the LGBTQ community.

Analysis of the focus group transcript revealed three key themes: (a) an increased desire to learn about social work practice with older adults in areas such as service delivery, advocacy, and education as a result of taking the course; (b) knowledge acquisition and enhanced awareness of important issues related to diversity, elder abuse, neglect, mobility issues, and the shortage of long-term care beds within the healthcare system; and (c) enjoyment of the course and appreciation of learning made possible through the course. Regarding the final theme, students reported enjoying the experience of learning from a variety of instructors as well as the asynchronous format of the discussion boards.

In addition to the formal evaluation that the instructional team conducted, students were provided the opportunity to participate in the university's standardized anonymous online course evaluation. The evaluation form includes 12 items, which are rated according to a 7-point ranking system, ranging from 1 = unacceptable to 7 = excellent (University of Calgary, n.d.). The response rate for the evaluation was 26.7% ($n = 8$). The mean ratings on all 12 items of the course evaluation were higher than the average ratings that students gave to their courses in the FSW globally. The item stating "students questions responded to" was given the highest mean rating out of the 12 items, $M = 6.14$, $SD = 0.99$. The lowest rating was for the item "enough detail in course outline" which received a mean score of $M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.62$.

Discussion and Implications

Two key outcomes of the instructional design and delivery strategies used for this course have been realized: (a) enhanced undergraduate social work student learning in relation to gerontology through the provision of relevant course content and (b) development, implementation, and evaluation of an innovative course design and delivery strategy. Based on our experience, we are able to make some recommendations to other faculty teams considering collaborative online teaching.

Enhanced Undergraduate Social Work Student Learning

Regarding undergraduate student learning, the evaluation of the course revealed that students experienced changes in their knowledge, values, beliefs, and attitudes about aging as a result of taking the course (Lun, 2012; Webb et al., 2015). Specifically, reduction in levels of ageism and negative stereotypes about older adults were observed. This finding echoes other research evaluating gerontological education at the undergraduate level (Allan & Johnson, 2008; Sellers, Bolender, & Crocker, 2010; Webb et al., 2015). Although modest improvement in student biases in relation to the topic of cognitive functioning and mental health among older adults was observed, this difference was not statistically significant. Replication of this assessment with future classes is recommended.

The formal course evaluation took the form of a cross-sectional analysis, meaning that data were collected at a specific point in time. Cross-sectional analysis does not allow for attributing changes in students' knowledge or attitudes directly to the course and does not support determination of the extent to which new knowledge or shifts in attitude will be retained over time. Likewise, the degree to which enhanced knowledge and improved attitudes toward aging will transfer to competence in professional social work practice with older adults is unknown. The existing literature suggests that it is unlikely that a single course can develop sufficient competency among social work students for skilled professional gerontological social work practice (Lun, 2012; Webb et al., 2015). Nonetheless, a single course in gerontology has been shown to increase interest and capacity in working with older adults among undergraduate social work students (Bergel, 2006). Extensive experience in interacting with older adults through personal, family, and community connections, as well as through employment or educational opportunities such as a practicum, have been shown to be helpful in preparing students for social work careers focused on gerontology (Gonclaves, 2009). Therefore, we suggest that our course provides a foundational introduction to gerontological social work. Preparing social work students to develop the full spectrum of professional practice competencies required to specialize in the complex field of geriatric social work requires that students be exposed to a combination of gerontological coursework and internships that focus on working with older adults (Gonclaves, 2009; Lun, 2012).

While our course was successful in terms of educating students about gerontology at an exploratory level, we cannot establish a causal relationship between taking our course and the future career paths and achievements of our students. A host of factors such as students' personal and professional exposure to older adults, pre-existing knowledge and attitudes toward aging prior to entering the course, professional development opportunities pursued after taking our course, community involvements, and other interests and opportunities within the broad field of social work may play significantly into their career planning and decision-making. At the same time, we consider the improvements in ageist attitudes and increased knowledge about aging among our students to be a successful outcome that will benefit both students and clients. These benefits will be realized in the students' future careers as social workers, regardless of whether or not they specialize in geriatric social work practice.

Development and Evaluation of an Innovative Course Design and Delivery Strategy

The development of our online course has enabled the FSW to provide one course in gerontological social work education to undergraduate students throughout the province of Alberta. Ensuring the sustainability of this course will require continued communication and advocacy with FSW colleagues and administration since many practice areas are regarded as critical to the development of practice competence among social work students. Additionally, there are practical limitations to the number of electives that can be offered by the FSW each year. While infusion of gerontological content across the undergraduate social work curriculum would enhance and sustain gerontological social work education over time, various barriers, including a lack of competence to teach this content among many social work faculty, persist (Webb et al., 2015). The modular design of the course facilitates a degree of sustainability as individual modules can be added or deleted in concert with the expertise of the faculty members available to teach the course. The result is increased flexibility and adaptability across

instructors and over time. It may also be possible to engage contract faculty to teach individual modules should resources and other circumstances permit.

Although our team experienced successful engagement in collaborative online teaching, we recognize that our model is not without limitations and various obstacles that must be overcome. First, forming a collaborative teaching team and developing new courses is a time-intensive and challenging endeavour. In particular the process requires instructors to make adjustments to their typical ways of working through their teaching activities (Leavitt, 2006). Second, a commitment to working collaboratively and making group-based decisions is required by all involved. Faculty collaboration on course design has been characterized as a “delicate” and “negotiated” process, where faculty members assume the role of team player which is often a new experience within the context of course design and development (Xu & Morris, 2007).

We found that several critical decisions needed to be made during the course design, delivery, and evaluation processes. For example, during the course design process, deciding which content to include was a challenge, because gerontological social work in itself is a broad topic. In line with the feminist principles adhered to by the group, including mutual respect and power sharing, our team made decisions about course content using a consensus-based decision making model (Colwill & Boyd, 2008). This approach involved meeting to dialogue about the options we had regarding course content, while carefully considering the need to balance current trends in the field and students' interests. We also made efforts to ensure that student expectations during the limited time available in a 13-week course were kept manageable (Xu & Morris, 2007). At the same time, the team was able to tailor the topics covered in the course to fit each instructor's areas of greatest experience and expertise. While this process was effective and educational, it was also time-consuming. In this regard, our experience engaging in mutually respectful communications; establishing shared values, principles, and expectations; and ensuring that the team process stayed on schedule, echoed descriptions of collaborative course design processes described in the literature (Xu & Morris, 2007).

In terms of course delivery, the biggest issue experienced by our team involved technical problems related to the online D2L platform. In particular, reliable Internet connections for students residing in distant or remote geographic areas were a persistent issue (Sitzmann, Ely, Bell, & Bauer, 2010). Further problems with connecting to the university's online systems resulted from software compatibility issues and took several weeks to be resolved. Students expressed frustration with these issues, and often instructors were unable to provide hands-on technical assistance to students. The impacts of technical difficulties within web-based learning environments are noteworthy as they can alter students' learning processes, motivation, and participation levels (Sitzmann et al., 2010; Webster & Hackley, 1997). In our case, the technical issues resulted in some students being unable to participate in some of the synchronous learning sessions. However, all sessions were captured through audio-recordings so that students who were unable to participate in the live sessions could still benefit by listening to recordings of the sessions they missed, to the extent that their technical capabilities and availability permitted.

A further challenge related to the group presentation assignment. In particular, while the majority of students were readily able to organize themselves into working teams, the instructors were required to facilitate group entry for a handful of students. In addition, a small number of students did not communicate with their group members in a timely manner, which created challenges for some groups in dividing the workload and engaging in the collaborative planning and dialogue necessary for efficient project completion and effective teamwork.

When group work is used as an instructional tool, such challenges should be anticipated. They are not unique to the online learning environment; they also occur in traditional face-to-face learning environments (Koh & Hill, 2009; Roberts & McInnerney, 2007). However, students may find online group projects particularly complex to carry out as they must adjust to working together within a virtual space (Land & Bayne, 2006). Many students find the group dynamics in an online group radically different from those in face-to-face groups (Jennings, 2006; Land & Bayne, 2006). This experience can create a temporary sense of instability and disorder as students develop online communication skills, explore

their roles as online learners within a virtual group, and negotiate individual and group presence within the online class environment (Land & Bayne, 2006). At the same time, online group projects provide opportunities for students to be highly collaborative and to share in cooperative knowledge creation and communication in new and exciting ways (Jennings, 2006).

Regarding the formal evaluation of the course conducted by the teaching team, the selection of scales for the pre- and post-assessments to measure students' learning outcomes was a further challenge. As noted, information on the validity and reliability for the FAMHQ is lacking, and future research on its psychometric properties is necessary (Van der Elst et al., 2014). Future research into ageism in relation to the socio-demographic characteristics of the students by gender is also recommended (Allan & Johnson, 2008; Fabroni et al., 1990; Kalavar, 2001; North & Fiske, 2012; Rupp et al., 2005). Culture and race (North & Fiske, 2012) are, likewise, areas in which research is required, since there is potential variation in ageist attitudes and knowledge based on these factors.

A further challenge with the formal evaluation for our team was the low participation rate in the focus group and the low response rate to the university's online course evaluation tool. Low participation and response rates reduce the representativeness of evaluation findings to the class as a whole (University of Saskatchewan, n.d.). In terms of the focus group, we suspect that the low participation rate was due to a combination of factors, such as the timing of the session and use of the same web-conferencing format that gave some students technical difficulties during the synchronous class meetings. The low response rate on the university's online course evaluation is likely to do with a combination of technical difficulties, lack of awareness, and a lack of interest or motivation to complete the online course evaluation among students. A low response rate to the university's online course evaluation is not in itself a cause for concern about the course, rather it is reflective of a trend that has been observed across North America for over a decade (Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008).

Recommendations for Collaborative Online Teaching

To help ensure a smooth process in the future, we recommend that faculty contemplating collaborative teaching set aside adequate time to plan for and prepare their course (Leavitt, 2006; Xu & Morris, 2007). In addition, establishing a set of principles to follow during course design and delivery processes, as our team did by agreeing to follow feminist principles and consensus-based decision-making, may help to prevent and resolve disagreements among team members (Xu & Morris, 2007).

Upon reflection, we noticed parallels between team teaching processes and the processes that students experience as they navigate the collaborative work for group assignments. For example, as with the students' group assignments, areas of potential concern for teaching, such as distribution of workload and conflict resolution processes, should be addressed at the beginning of the project. Likewise, we propose that many of the strategies used by students to successfully complete group assignments can be used to facilitate successful team teaching. For both student groups and teaching teams, communication is critical. We recommend that teaching teams meet regularly to ensure that all team members have a shared understanding and agreement on key elements of course design and delivery including assignments, grading procedures, course materials, and pedagogical strategies (Leavitt, 2006). We found that the grading rubrics we developed and shared with the students at the beginning of the course facilitated ease of communication around assessment of student learning among all parties (Rochford & Borchert, 2011; Truemper, 2004; Wyss et al., 2014). Our team was also able to hold all of our planning sessions online via Skype, with additional communication taking place over email as needed. This approach not only enabled us to plan the course collaboratively from distant locations around the globe but also helped us to practice and hone our online communication skills prior to engaging in collaborative online course delivery. This was important, since technical skills have been identified as a critical elements of collaborative online instruction (Xu & Morris, 2007).

Conclusion

Given the universality of the experience of aging and the current demographic trend of a rapidly increasing older adult population, it is important to address ageism among social work students who are the future social work workforce (Boswell, 2012; Gonclaves, 2009; Kalavar, 2001; Webb et al., 2015). Preparing the social work workforce to meet the challenges of the present boom in the older adult population will require innovative strategies that enhance career interest in gerontological practice among students and ensure that social workers are committed to developing the competencies required to work skillfully with older adults (Boswell, 2012; Lun, 2012; Webb et al., 2015). The model of online collaborative teaching and learning described in this paper may be a useful way of achieving this objective. Social work educators across North America may well consider this project to be a model for introducing gerontological social work education to undergraduate students, especially when departments are seeking to offer courses across large geographic distances, or to cater to the needs of non-traditional learners. Given the success of our model, we suggest that it may be possible to adapt it for teaching in other content areas and allied academic disciplines, such as nursing, psychology, sociology, disability studies, community health sciences, and community rehabilitation. We believe that, by embracing and promoting collaborative teaching models such as this one, faculty members and undergraduate students alike will benefit from expanded possibilities for connection and learning.

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