Using ICT to Teach Clinical Social Work Skills in New Zealand: Academic Reflections

Nicky Stanley-Clarke

BSW (Hons), MSW (Hons), PhD, Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work, Massey University, NZ

Address for Correspondence:

n.stanley-clarke@massey.ac.nz.

ABSTRACT

This article explores New Zealand social work educators' experiences of using information and communication technologies (ICT) to teach clinical social work skills. The development of new digital technologies, blended learning approaches and a desire to engage with social work students has prompted social work educators to consider the role of ICT in the delivery of clinical social work courses. The research was an exploratory study utilising semi-structured, qualitative interviews with seven social work educators from New Zealand tertiary providers. The aim of this research was to understand New Zealand social work educators' views on ICT. This included how well existing ICT works as well as the challenges and future possibilities of using ICT in teaching clinical social work. The results of the study confirmed that social work educators across New Zealand utilise a variety of ICT platforms including Zoom, Skype, Adobe Connect, Moodle and Blackboard, amongst others. These tools have been employed asynchronously to create a blended learning environment with discussion forums and to deliver course materials including written documents and podcasts. Social work educators also adapted the ICT to support synchronous educational opportunities enabling their students to be present in virtual classrooms to learn, engage and practise the use of interpersonal clinical social work skills. The results from this study support that existing ICT offers the opportunity to engage face-to-face with social work students outside of the physical classroom and can be utilised to support the incremental development of clinical skills. The use of ICT to teach clinical social work skills is consequently redefining the nature of face-to-face contact. This challenges social work educators and regulators to consider what face-to-face means for meeting the standards for professional recognition and registration.

Keywords: *Information communication technology; E-learning; Social work education; Online learning platforms*

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are opening doors in social work education, challenging social work educators to think about how ICT can support the delivery and development of clinical social work skills (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Phillips et al., 2018; Stanley-Clarke, English, & Yeung, 2018; Washburn & Zhou, 2018). The opportunities for engaging with students and having the digital technologies to ensure successful integration and development of knowledge creates possibilities beyond traditional face-to-face methods of teaching. Social work educators are currently experimenting and adopting new on-line mechanisms for the delivery of social work education with the possibilities including *asynchronous*, *synchronous* or *blended learning*. Asynchronous learning enables students to access online resources at a time that suits them. Synchronous learning involves the educator and student being present at the same time. Blended learning involves a combination of asynchronous and synchronous approaches.

This article presents the findings of a study exploring New Zealand social work educators' perspectives of the use of ICT in teaching clinical social work skills. It details the experiences of seven New Zealand educators using ICT, including how well existing tools work, the opportunities and the challenges of using ICT in the delivery of clinical social work courses. In particular, the study highlights the creativity of social work educators, and how they maximise the opportunities for engagement as well as supporting the development of clinical skills.

BACKGROUND

The New Zealand Social Work Registration Board (SWRB) is the regulatory body in New Zealand responsible for the registration of social workers (Social Workers Registration Act, 2003). As part of the SWRB's mandate, they have the authority to recognise programmes and set standards for social work education that fit with the goals of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003. The SWRB assesses New Zealand social work programmes against these predetermined programme recognition requirements, ensuring that social work education providers meet the standards of social work education required for practising social work in New Zealand (SWRB, 2018).

According to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2019), a central government agency, the demand for social workers in New Zealand is rising. In 2017 there were 17 recognised social work education providers offered by a variety of institution including universities, polytechnics, wānanga (Māori higher education), and one private training establishment (Beddoe, Hay, Maidment, Ballantyne, & Walker, 2018). In 2017, there were 3310 students enrolled in recognised social work programmes (SWRB, 2017). Courses are taught both face-to-face and via distance utilising a variety of approaches.

In most undergraduate, face-to-face Bachelor of Social Work programmes in New Zealand, students attend weekly laboratories where they learn clinical skills and develop confidence in applying social work models. In contrast, distance students rely on face-to-face attendance at contact workshops. The SWRB (2018) requires all distance social work programmes to have a minimum of 20 days' face-to-face social work skills teaching across the programme.

The face-to-face contact days offered by New Zealand social work programmes generally include a laboratory component where students can practise their clinical skills. However, the current system of engaging with distance students via contact workshops is compressed and does not provide for the same weekly progression of skills achieved by students attending face-to-face classes across a semester.

Social work literature is full of articles questioning the validity and use of ICT in teaching clinical social work skills (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2018; Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Levin, Witsett, & Wood, 2013). In particular, social work educators are concerned that the skills learnt in the online environment do not capture the nuances and intricacies of interpersonal interaction including body language or facial cues (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2018; Farrel et al., 2018; Wilson, Brown, Wood, & Farkas, 2013). In line with the findings of Washburn and Zhou (2018), social work programmes within New Zealand struggle to find ways for students to practise and develop their clinical skills outside the face-to-face classroom and field education experiences.

The development and use of ICT in social work education has reduced the barriers for many students engaging in social work education (Farrel et al., 2018). Up until the early 2000s, institutional pressure and student demand were the primary drivers for the use of ICT by social work educators (Farrel et al., 2018). These tools focused primarily on asynchronous learning through platforms including Moodle and Blackboard, the inclusion of podcasts, audio recordings, online readings as well as discussion forums. The use of asynchronous ICT does have benefits in terms of being easily accessible, reducing barriers to education, enabling students to learn at their own pace in their own timeframes, as well as creating space for reflection and critical analysis (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2018; Farrel et al., 2018; Desai, Hart, & Richards, 2008; Parker-Oliver & Demiris, 2006; Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh, 2008). Making social work education more accessible and supporting students to have flexibility in their engagement has enabled many students to study by distance while undertaking paid employment and managing the demands of family life (Fitch, Canada, Cary, & Freese, 2016; Washburn & Zhou, 2018). Additionally, Washburn and Zhou (2018) discuss how the introduction and flexibility of using ICT within a social work programme has supported the recruitment of social workers in areas of skill shortage to work with the most vulnerable populations in society.

Most ICT requires adaptation, and social work educators are challenged to think creatively about the possibilities for use within their courses. A central concern of New Zealand social work educators is the lack of an effective online platform in which to teach and practise clinical skills. Up until this point it has been the scope and technological parameters of the ICT that have driven how social work educators use these tools within their courses. As ICT has developed and social work educators become more accustomed to using these tools, their potential within social work education for engagement, retention and relationship building is being further explored (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Farrel et al., 2018; Iverson Hitchcock & Young, 2016; Phillips et al., 2018). However, none of these ICT tools is fit for purpose and social work educators have been told to adopt tools under the guise of embracing teaching within the modern paradigm (Farrel et al., 2018).

Research is beginning to explore some of the benefits of synchronous technology for example webinars and the use of breakout rooms using online conferencing platforms such as Zoom. Fitch et al. (2016) found that, despite the differences between the virtual and face-to-face environment, the online environment still enabled reading of non-verbal communication. While confidence with the technology is an important variable in its successful adoption, Farrel et al. (2018) found there were higher levels of student engagement and satisfaction in courses where ICT was used. They noted that Zoom was an especially effective platform that is free, easy to use and the user-interface preserves the one-on-one experience (Farrel et al., 2018). Their research found that the online role play room created intimacy and reduced performance anxiety for students who felt intimidated practising in a face-to-face classroom environment (Farrel et al., 2018). Additionally, a study by Phillips et al. (2018) found that using ICT to support the development of core social work competencies before, and alongside, fieldwork experiences provided benefits to the fieldwork agency and supported students in developing confidence in using core clinical skills. Yet, as with all teaching, it is about balancing student needs and satisfaction. While some students embrace and enjoy the online experience, others find this distancing and prefer face-to-face engagement (Farrel et al., 2018; Fitch et al., 2016).

METHOD

The aim of this research was to understand New Zealand social work educators' views on ICT. This included how well existing ICT works, as well as the challenges and future possibilities of using ICT in teaching clinical social work. The research was an exploratory study utilising semi-structured qualitative interviews with social work educators from four New Zealand tertiary providers. The choice of a qualitative methodology supported an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences of using ICT in their teaching. The research received ethical approval from the university's Human Ethics Committee.

Interviews were undertaken with seven educators from four tertiary providers. Three of the institutions offered distance learning programmes and one only offered a face-to-face programme. Participants were key informants, identified using purposeful sampling. This sampling technique enabled participants to be strategically selected to ensure they had knowledge and experience of using ICT and could contribute a variety of perspectives (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Patton, 2015).

The researcher sent an email to eight potential participants at five social work tertiary education providers inviting them to participate. The email included an information sheet with detail related to the project's goals, participants' rights as well as the anticipated time commitment. While the researcher knew all the participants as peers prior to the research, there was no other relationship. All the participants responded positively to the initial invitation. Seven participants agreed to be interviewed, the eighth indicated they were too busy to participate at that time.

Interviews were undertaken at times convenient to the participants. Five of the interviews were undertaken on-line using Zoom, a video conferencing tool. The other two interviews were conducted face-to-face. An interview guide provided a framework for the interviews.

The use of an interview guide ensured consistency of the core topics explored with each participant and acted as a checklist for the researcher to ensure these topics were covered (Patton, 2015). The use of this method enabled the researcher to use open-ended questions and prompts to generate a conversation with the participants about the use of ICT in clinical social work programmes. Topics covered in the interviews included participants' experiences and reflections of using ICT; their successes; and challenges and visions for the future use of ICT.

The interviews were undertaken between August and November 2018. Interviews were approximately an hour long. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by a paid transcriber. All participants were offered the opportunity to check and correct their interview transcripts; these were returned to those who requested. Two participants amended their transcripts to ensure accuracy of their data. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were allocated pseudonyms and any identifiable information was anonymised or removed.

The researcher thematically analysed the data. Thematic analysis involves the process of identifying patterns and/or themes within data, ascribing meaning to the themes and then reporting on the key findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2015). The nature of thematic analysis is driven by the research, its specific focus including any research questions. The process of data analysis began during data collection as the researcher made field notes following each interview reflecting on the nature of the interview, key points and trends across the interviews. To support the process of data analysis the following questions were asked of the data:

- How is ICT utilised in the delivery of clinical social work programmes?

- How effective are the current tools including strengths and challenges?

- What are the possibilities for utilising ICT?

Each transcript was read, and key points noted in relation to the above research questions. As this was an inductive study there were no pre-existing frameworks that shaped the identification of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Similarities, points of difference and items of interest were noted and checked in a recursive process across all the transcripts. The themes were allocated relative importance based on their frequency across the data and their ability to generate knowledge in relation to the research questions. Data were triangulated across the interviews, with the field notes and further analysed in relation to literature available on the topic.

 Trustworthiness is an important criterion of qualitative research. Trustworthiness requires that the researcher has taken steps to ensure participants' perspectives are reflective of their reality and are accurately interpreted relative to the study's findings (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). One potential limitation on a study's trustworthiness is the researcher's own subjectivity. The researcher in this study was aware of her own insider role as an educator in a social work programme within New Zealand. The researcher engaged in reflexivity across the research process, being careful not to impose any preconceived impressions or inter-

pretations on the data and the perspectives of participants. Further, the nature of the study's method supported the trustworthiness of the data and research findings.

The use of semi-structured interviews as part of a qualitative study enabled the researcher to gain unique insights into the participants' experiences. The use of this method meant that data collection focused on a portion of views from selected participants. Four of the participants were lecturers and three were professional clinicians/research fellows. All except one participant was female. While not generalisable, the findings from this study have proximal similarity, meaning that they may be transferable across similar populations (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Patton, 2015). Additionally, the findings from the study may contribute to theory building and form a foundation of knowledge for future research, including evaluative research with students.

RESULTS

The results of the study explore participants' current experiences of using ICT alongside their impressions of the validity of using ICT in their teaching. The results also detail the challenges posed by a lack of fit between existing ICT platforms and current delivery mechanisms, requiring participants to be creative and adapt existing technology to fit the needs of the learning environment. Lastly, this section reflects on the future implications of using ICT for social work education.

Current experience of ICT

All the tertiary institutions involved in this study utilised an online learning platform— the most common were variations of Moodle and Blackboard although there were other bespoke platforms. The platforms were used for sharing information, discussion, as well as submitting and returning assignments. Some institutions utilised other online conferencing software including Adobe connect, Zoom and Skype to support the delivery of their courses. For most of the participants, ICT was primarily used to support asynchronous learning, as Mandy explained:

> …the on-campus students tend to use [the platform], just as a repository for the link to their readings, and the weekly lecture slides, that's what the on-campus students need that for. They can, however, get into the recordings of lectures if they want to. The distance students get that plus, in the discussion board is where all the distance tutorials are usually run, and if there has been a recording of some kind, then they will see that.

Mandy tailored her use of ICT to suit her audience, but found benefits for both face-to-face and distance students. She explained that, for her, the main benefits of using ICT were in relationship building:

> I quite like that idea that you must have social presence with your distance students, and how you go about creating that in this environment where they are not seeing you every day. What do you do that makes it easy for them to contact you when they need to, in the same way as students in the class, and say hey, I'm a bit unsure about "x"…So that's why I [use ICT and] send a few meaningless emails through that semester to try and build that sense of social relationship.

Discussion forums and posting online lectures and/or podcasts were the most common use of ICT. Participants found value in using these tools, as they enabled their students to reflect on their answers and consider the implications of the topic for their clinical social work practice. Karen linked her lectures and other course resources to topics discussed in the online forums:

> …to engage [students] more with the chat forum… I said watch all of these, what do you think of them, how did you feel when you were watching them, how does this impact on how you might like to practice. You know, that real reflective stuff.

Sophia adopted a similar approach to her discussion forums by using: "questions, reflections, getting them to try and engage with each other. Or what each other's written and making comments."

Participants found that they were initially very cautious about using ICT with most having had limited experience with using the tools prior to being asked to deliver courses that required ICT. Linda's experience was typical of many, she described ICT as being a "brave new world", where she found herself having to use and adapt ICT without any prior knowledge as to how to do so:

> It's quite interesting when you are a teacher because there is that expectation that you will know what you are doing. So, it's tricky if you don't... It a credibility issue, you don't want to be seen as a fraud… The thing is that you are just left to your own devices, you just do your best. (Linda)

Once the participants had experience in using new tools and developed confidence in using ICT in their teaching delivery, they seemed to embrace the tools which then became a standard part of their teaching toolkit. Sophia explained that she "was initially really nervous about teaching distance, but …found [using ICT a] really rewarding way of teaching, and really interesting way of teaching."

Even those participants involved in teaching only face-to-face classes, where there was not such a need to engage through an online platform, as they saw the students in classrooms each week, found value in using ICT. Olivia, who taught in a face-to-face programme, explained that they still had instances where ICT broke down barriers for students, stating: "some people have used things like Google docs to do group assignments, and assessments in groups, and some people are using [online] quizzes to try to get people to do reading." Adam explained that students, like educators, were initially apprehensive of using any ICT, stating they: "always find it incredibly challenging at the beginning and then, by the [end], most say it's the best thing since sliced bread" (Adam).

Creative uses of ICT

All the participants found that they had to be creative in how they adapted ICT for use with their social work students. Ruth explained: "it's kind of work with what [ICT] you have got, and then try and develop it more to fit in with today's practice. Then sit with that for a bit." Mandy found that ICT offered new possibilities, especially if you were

willing to learn and explore using the tools she said: "I am playing around with methods … part of it is to do with us having the attitude of being open to having new developments and trying things out."

Several of the participants had tried using ICT synchronously with students using Zoom, Skype or Adobe Connect. These tools had been variously employed to deliver synchronous question-and-answer sessions for all students and to support students to virtually "attend" face-to-face lectures. Olivia and Linda had supported students to join their classes using Skype and Zoom. For Olivia, the students had met all the face-to-face requirements of the programme but were doing fieldwork overseas. In these instances, students had used Skype to enable themselves to participate alongside their classmates in the classroom. Olivia explained: "we currently have students doing placements in England and Ireland, and so they Skype into classes." Olivia outlined that, while this was an effective use of ICT, time differences and the use of Skype was reliant on other students providing the technology to support those overseas to join the class:

> …it sort of relies on one of their colleagues who's their friend, saying yes, I'm happy for you to come in on my computer through the class, and then just bring them in really, and they engage in conversations and in small group work, and they listen to the lectures, and occasionally we ask them questions on the computer, and we remember that they are there (Olivia).

Linda found the experience of using Zoom to join students together reduced the financial barriers for students who needed to attend a compulsory contact workshop. She was initially wary of using ICT in this way, but found the experience worked well, noting:

> … I am going to have to do that again next year …. That was great …. From a social work perspective, it's glorious because people with disability, or compromised by distance, they don't need to be disadvantaged. So, it's gold. Especially for post-grads, they just love that chance of sharing their practice wisdom and the reflection, so that they can be involved in that even if they can't make the course (Linda).

Other ICT tools for engaging distance students including synchronous lectures and tutorials. Sophia explained:

> …when I teach, I usually have a fortnightly Zoom session with them, where we will go over the lectures for the past two weeks - check any questions, go over the readings. And then we spend the second hour doing role plays. So I put them in rooms on Zoom and we do role plays that way.

Mandy also delivered lectures to her distance students in a two-hour block online each week. She began the week by using the online discussion forum:

> …every Monday I post what I call a curious question. So that's a single question I get them to prepare for the Friday [online] lecture. So, on Monday they are supposed to log in, look at the curious minds question, which inevitably leads to some reading for

the Friday lecture. So, then they post a reply on anything at all, then on the Friday morning, I give the lecture via Zoom. I begin the lecture by discussing their responses to the curious minds question. I do that quite purposefully to make them realise that I do actually read those (Mandy).

Sophia and Ruth had created virtual classrooms to learn, engage and practise the use of inter-personal clinical social work skills across the semester. This process was undertaken using the Zoom breakout rooms function. Sophia and Ruth both stated that they felt this was very similar to practising role plays with students in a face-to-face classroom except in the online environment. Sophia explained how this worked:

…there's a function on Zoom—I think it is called break-out rooms, and you just [allocate the students to the rooms], and then you can just come into each grouping that you have made. So I can come in, observe how they are going, provide feedback and that sort of thing. So yeah, that does seem to work really well.

Sophia and Ruth had both found this to be a very successful mechanism for students to practice and incrementally develop their clinical skills in a similar way to face-to-face teaching. Ruth commented:

…I do think that Zoom does work really well when they engage in it. It's a really good method of teaching distance, because it's interactive, it's face to face, it's got that ability for them to do small group work, so often they won't speak in the bigger groups, but maybe I will send them away… if I ask them the same question, say go away, have a chat, and then bring them back, same as you would with a group that wasn't speaking on campus, it works in a similar way. They would have then generated some ideas, generated their own thinking and then can come back with some words for me to work with.

Sophia concurred saying that she was initially very apprehensive of using the technology but:

…having that interaction with the students, and being able to observe them in their role plays and providing that feedback has been really important … I was really nervous about how it was going to work, the role plays. I was pleasantly surprised around that.

Ruth had also received positive feedback from students saying that they had appreciated ICT being used in this way. Ruth also found that the Zoom sessions supported peer development and relationship building. She noted that learning by distance was essentially a very lonely process and that, at the Zoom sessions, the students "will be talking about how they are getting on as well… linking them up," providing opportunities for the students to connect and get to know one another.

Challenges in using ICT
All participants experienced frustration around how to ensure all students engaged with ICT. Karen explained that her approaches to engaging students differed according to whether students were face-to-face or distance: "Well even though I pretty much offer them the same material, they seem to be quite different in how you engage with the students, and

things like that." Her experience was that distance students were much more likely to engage with ICT as this was their primary method for receiving information about the course. Whereas she explained that: "the internal students don't use [ICT] as much. I guess there is less of a reliance on it because they can see it face-to-face" (Karen).

For distance students, attending synchronous lectures and tutorials as well as participating in the online Zoom sessions were in addition to contact workshops creating an additional study/workload burden, hence attendance and participation varied according to whether these sessions were compulsory. Mandy explained commitment dwindled as the teaching semester wore on: "We are only four weeks in. At the first one we had about 15 turn up out of 23. At the second one and the third one we had about 5 or 6 out of 23." Ruth related the lack of attendance with the time commitment involved, but she felt this was generally an excuse and that those students who were really engaged in their study made the effort, noting: "Given that it was only 4 times for the semester … if you really want to and you are organised, you can say to [your employer], look I have got this thing for two hours, you can do it".

Most participants noted that the easiest way to ensure participation with an online activity was to make it compulsory and/or attach an assessment component to the activity. Adam explained that if students knew they were being observed and assessed, the students made the most of the ICT opportunities. His experience was that, in embedding reflection and self-assessment into the exercise students, did "interact... which is very good actually." Olivia's experience was similar:

> …students are wary of doing things that aren't given marks, and so we have certainly found that, and the thing that we want them to undertake, we usually have to build in some assessment component into it, so things like making the comment on a noticeboard, we may assign participation marks for those sorts of things.

Karen felt that being creative with ICT was challenging and often not recognised within the context of an academic role that prioritised publications:

> …I love being creative and doing new things, but managing the technology sometimes and the time and energy that goes with it means you are putting a lot of attention to that stuff, whereas sometimes that it not as valued in your practice, in terms of things like publications.

Mandy concurred, stating that limited time availability and workload implications created barriers to being able to spend time using ICT creatively, "I think we have too much on our plates. We are expected to be experts in everything … keeping up with [what's] new, also takes time and energy."

The time and workload implications were often highlighted when technology did not work as it should. Karen had spent time and energy on recording podcasts only to find out they had not recorded. Adam had found that, in one instance, students' role plays which they had recorded and uploaded had simply disappeared, describing it as: "just a nightmare." Sophia and Ruth had spent hours attempting to download material from their online

platform, Ruth stated that this was: "not smooth sailing". Additional resourcing was seen to be the answer with research fellows, tutors and ICT experts being employed at some institutions to support the development and use of ICT.

Future possibilities and implications

As previously noted, all the participants had been creative in their use of ICT in teaching clinical social work. They all also believed that there were real possibilities and potential as ICT continued to develop. Mandy believed that, since her confidence using ICT had increased, she would consider other possibilities such as streaming her face-to-face lectures directly to distance students or doing a "live tutorial." Sophia felt that if she had additional training she was sure she would uncover "what's possible, not just what we are doing, but what are the possibilities." Adam saw potential in using ICT "to actually practise skills in a simulated context that might work" and was also currently experimenting with a tool that enabled video annotations, Adam explained how this worked:

> …the tutor can comment on something they have noticed [in the recorded role play] at that point in time. What the students get back is the video in one corner, and then a list of comments on the right-hand side.

Olivia summed up the feeling across all participants that the use of ICT had possibility and was about "enhancing, rather than replacing" current teaching methods. All participants acknowledged that being creative with ICT required additional support and resources. Sophia stated it was important to have "some expertise out there that can say, oh look, we have discovered this new technology that's working really well. Have you heard about this? This is how it works for us." Adam summed this up by saying:

> …in other words, this technology affords certain actions, it allows certain things to happen, and what is important is to think, from a teaching and learning point of view, what are we trying to do here and how will this technology help us to achieve that outcome.

All the programmes met their obligations to the SWRB through 20 face-to-face contact days with most programmes far exceeding that number. The requirement for students to engage in online activities, especially synchronous activities, is currently not counted as part of the face-to-face contact days. There was debate amongst participants who felt that a portion of the synchronous activities should be counted, Olivia noted:

> The interesting thing is that if the student is coming into the classroom on Skype, are they actually in the classroom? I think that I would be prepared to argue that they are in the classroom if they are attending lectures through Skype.

Participants felt that the ongoing advances and creative use of ICT were changing the nature of online engagement both in social work education as well as in some fields of practice. Participants discussed that, despite the creative ways in which they used ICT and the possibilities for the future for a few students, this did not replace the face-to-face experience for some students. Sophia summed this up:

> I think that despite the fact that the general feedback is that Zoom works well, people prefer the face to face… And I guess that whole thing around it's not face to face, so [some] people not feeling that same level of connection and the same interaction with other staff.

Sophia equated this with some students' fears around using technology rather than any fault of the ICT. Despite this, a number of the participants felt it was time for the profession to begin thinking about what constitutes in-person or face-to-face contact in relation to meeting the standards for professional recognition and registration. The views of participants also highlight the need for further evaluative research capturing the student perspective of using online platforms.

DISCUSSION

This article details the ICT experiences of seven social work educators from New Zealand. The findings of the study highlight these educators' current experiences with ICT, the creative ways in which they utilise the tools as well as the opportunities and challenges. The results support that, in addition to breaking down distance barriers to social work education, existing ICT offers the opportunity to engage face-to-face with social work students outside of the physical classroom and can be utilised to support the incremental development of clinical skills over time.

Sun et al. (2008) report that the effectiveness of using ICT is dependent on the motivation of the educator to embrace and use the tools. In their study, they found a relationship between the educator's attitude to e-learning and student satisfaction and performance in the course (Sun et al., 2008). A few of the participants in this study had been reluctant engagers with ICT and needed time to develop confidence. Yet, all the participants utilised ICT in their teaching of clinical social work skills. In a similar vein to Farrel et al. (2018), participants in this study found that they had to adapt their learning platforms to suit their students and used online conferencing tools creatively to support student learning. The participants had all experimented and adapted ICT to maximise student engagement, relationship building as well as critical reflection. The example of Olivia enabling students to Skype into a class in a programme that was not set up to support distance students, is an example of the creative ways participants utilised the tools.

A central concern for educators related to the use of ICT is the time involved in developing and delivering courses, including workload implications. University management often assumes distance study requires less resourcing; that using an online platform to deliver courses will free staff up from the physical classroom creating space to focus on other projects (Desai et al., 2008, Ferrera, Ostrander, & Crabtree-Nelson, 2013, Levin et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2008; Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Minke, & Frantz Adkins, 2009). However, in accordance with findings of Stanley-Clarke et al. (2018), workload and resourcing implications were the biggest barriers to the educators being able to further explore and utilise ICT.

As ICT develops, the possibilities for using these tools to practise clinical social work tools is exciting. Washburn and Zhou (2018) discuss the possibilities presented by the development of simulation technologies. Basic simulations are already in existence as decision trees, where students are required to answer questions from a list of predetermined responses (Washburn & Zhou, 2018). Washburn and Zhou (2018) highlight the emergence of research within medical education that supports similar results for students' learning using virtual simulation with the added benefit that, in a simulation, students can repeat the activity to evaluate different choices of action. Farrel et al. (2018) found that avatars provided social work students with the ability to engage but noted that the technology was still underdeveloped. Not waiting for technology to catch up, Mandy and Ruth had adapted Zoom to create a virtual platform for practising clinical social work skills. This experience they felt mirrored the face-to-face classroom process and, in accordance with other research, found that the use of the online platform reduced anxiety amongst some participants and increased participation, as well as relationship building, across their distance cohort (Farrel et al., 2018; Fitch et al., 2016).

Keeping students engaged is a significant challenge across all forms of social work education. Keeping students engaged in the online classroom takes more time and effort and educators need to be more creative (Farrel et al., 2018; Stanley-Clarke et al., 2018). The participants in this study faced many of the same challenges as do social work educators around the globe. Many felt that providing incentives to attend and participate such as making participation in the online environment part of the requirements for the course or allocating assessment marks to the activity were the most effective mechanisms for ensuring attendance; but this did not necessarily equate with engagement.

While acknowledging that the use of ICT is still in its infancy in New Zealand, it has benefits as a supplement to the face-to-face experience. In all the New Zealand programmes involved with this study, students' clinical skills were assessed by completing face-to-face skills tests and by submitting recorded role plays with written reflections. Synchronous, online, role-playing activity was seen as a supplement to contact workshops which occurred once or twice during the course. The benefits of the synchronous role play experience included the ability for students to practise and incrementally develop skills over time with the input of a social work educator in the same way they do in the face-to-face classroom. However, the requirement to participate in ICT activities, especially synchronous activities, places an additional workload burden on students over and above the required 20 face-to-face contact hours that are required by the SWRB. Currently, online engagement is not considered to be equivalent to the face-to-face experience despite promising evidence showing equivalence in outcomes and benefits for students (McAllister, 2013; Pelech et al., 2013). The findings of this study challenge social work educators and regulators, including the SWRB and the Council of Social Work Educators Aotearoa New Zealand (CSWEANZ), to consider what face-to-face means for meeting the standards for professional recognition and registration and asks, at what point does the profession broaden the definition to include synchronous ICT activities?

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to understand New Zealand social work educators' views on ICT. This included how well existing ICT works alongside the challenges and future possibilities of using ICT in teaching clinical social work. The results of this study highlight the willingness of social work educators to embrace ICT and to be creative in its utilisation. The use of breakout rooms in Zoom were found to be particularly effective for students to practise role plays, with participants seeing little difference between the online and face-to-face environment in relation to skill development and the student experience. In accordance with other research, this study found student engagement and workload implications for both students and educators to be the biggest challenge when using ICT. As ICT continues to develop, the possibilities for creating virtual worlds with avatars and simulations offer further opportunities to consider how ICT can be employed within social work programmes. The success and benefits of using ICT to deliver social work education does challenge the profession to begin thinking about what constitutes face-to-face engagement, particularly in meeting the standards for professional recognition and registration.

References

Beddoe, L., Hay, K., Maidment, J., Ballantyne, N., & Walker, S. (2018). Readiness to practice social work in Aotearoa New Zealand: Perceptions of students and educators. *Social Work Education*, *37*(8), 955–967.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Coe Regan, J. A. R., & Youn, E. J. (2008). Past, present, and future trends in teaching clinical skills through web-based learning environments. *Journal of Social Work Education, 44*(2), 95–116.

Desai, M. S., Hart, J., & Richards, T. C. (2008). E-learning: Paradigm shift in education. *Education, 129*(2), 327–334.

Farrel, D., Ray, K., Telvis, R., Suarez, Z., Christenson, B., & Jennigs, L. (2018). A meta-analysis of approaches to engage social work students online. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *38*(4), 183–197.

Ferrera, M., Ostrander, N., & Crabtree-Nelson, S. (2013). Establishing a community of inquiry through hybrid courses in clinical social work education. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *33*(4–5), 438–448.

Fitch, D., Canada, K., Cary, S., & Freese, R. (2016). Facilitating social work roles plays in online courses: The use of video conferencing. *Advances in Social Work*, *17*(1), 78–92.

Iverson Hitchcock, L., & Young, J. A. (2016). Tweet, Tweet! Using live Twitter chats in social work education. *Social Work Education*, *35*(4), 457–469.

Levin, S., Witsett, D., & Wood, G. (2013). Teaching social work practice in a blended online environment. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 33*(4–5), 408–420.

Lietz, C. A., & Zayas, L. E. (2010). Evaluating qualitative research for social work practitioners. *Advances in Social Work*, *11*(2), 188–202.

McAllister, C. (2013). A process evaluation of an online BSW program: Getting the student perspective. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *33*(4–5), 514–530.

Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. (2019). *Occupation outlook*. Retrieved from http://occupationoutlook.mbie.govt.nz/social-and-community/social-workers/

Parker-Oliver, D., & Demiris, G. (2006). Social work informatics: A new speciality. *Social Work*, *51*(2), 127–137.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Pelech, W., Wulff, D., Perrault, E., Ayala, J., Baynton, M., Williams, M., … Shankar, J. (2013). Current challenges in social work distance education: Responses from the Elluminati. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *33*(4-5), 393–407.

Phillips, E. S., Wood, G. J., Yoo, J., Ward, K. J., Hsiao, S. C., Singh, M. I., & Morris, B. (2018). A virtual field practicum: Building core competencies prior to agency placement. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *54*(4), 620–640.

Social Workers Registration Board. (2017). *Social work education providers: Annual report 2017*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.

Social Workers Registration Board. (2018). *Programme recognition standards—December 2018*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.

Stanley-Clarke, N., English, A., & Yeung, P. (2018). Cutting the distance in distance education: Reflections on the use of e-technologies in a New Zealand social work program. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 38*(2), 137–150. doi:10.1080/0884123 3.2018.1433739

Sun, P. C., Tsai, R. J., Finger, G., Chen, Y. Y., & Yeh, D. (2008). What drives a successful e-learning? An empirical investigation of the critical factors influencing learner satisfaction. *Computers & Education, 50*(4), 1183–1202.

Vernon, R., Vakalahi, H., Pierce, D., Pittman-Minke, P., & Frantz Adkins, L. (2009). Distance education programmes in social work: Current and emerging trends. *Journal of Social Work Education, 45*(2), 263–276.

Washburn, M., & Zhou, S. (2018). Teaching note—Technology-enhanced clinical simulations: Tools for practicing clinical skills in online social work programs. *Journal of Social Work Education, 54*(3), 554–560.

Wilson, A. B., Brown, S., Wood, Z. B., & Farkas, K. J. (2013). Teaching direct practice skills using web-based simulations: Home visiting in the virtual world. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 33*(4–5), 421–437.