Online Social Work Education and the Disinhibition Effect

Rachel Schwartz, Laura Curran and Marian Diksies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, School of Social Work

Address for Correspondence:

rschwartz@ssw.rutgers.edu

ABSTRACT

In this paper, theoretically anchored composite case examples will be presented from a mid-sized, fully online MSW program to illustrate the *disinhibition* effect and how it impacts on classroom and program dynamics. Classroom communications (discussion boards and emails) as well as program communications (social media postings) will be analysed to better understand the conditions under which disinhibition can occur and exacerbating factors unique to the social work curriculum. An examination of effective classroom and program management strategies (i.e., articulation of communication standards and expectations, student and faculty training), as well as a consideration of the productive pedagogical uses of disinhibition will be included.

With the rise of varying forms of virtual communication and social media, popular media and academic literature has increasingly documented accounts of toxic interchange—from online bullying to the phenomena of "trolling" and "haters." This paper examines how potentially toxic forms of communication manifest in an online MSW program. Grounded within the larger theoretical construct of "online disinhibition," composite case examples illustrate the factors contributing to disinhibition in the virtual social work classroom and how they impact on classroom and program dynamics. A discussion of effective classroom and program management strategies follows. Given the growth of online social work education and the lack of pedagogical social work literature addressing this issue, this paper fills a gap in our current knowledge base.

BACKGROUND: WHAT IS ONLINE DISINHIBITION?

Scholars examining virtual communication have identified a phenomenon termed the "online disinhibition effect" (Roed, 2003; Suler, 2004a). According to this concept, individuals communicating online may feel anonymous, invisible, and more comfortable disclosing or confronting issues in a virtual setting, due to the often less immediate or depersonalised nature of the online environment (Neff & Donaldson, 2013; Roed, 2003; Suler, 2004a). Research in this area does differentiate between benign and toxic disinhibition; with benign disinhibition seen as promoting positive dialogue and social connection (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015). While online communications may encourage those who otherwise feel uncomfortable sharing their viewpoints in a different setting, toxic disinhibition can be seen when communications become aggressive, particularly when sharing personal opinions or responding to criticism, in a way that would not occur in a face-to-face context (Suler, 2004a). Common manifestations of toxic disinhibition include online harassment that may result in *flaming* behaviour, e.g. insulting or offensive comments, swearing, using all caps, threats, or aggressive language and punctuation (Wu, Lin, & Shih, 2017). In their report on online harassment, the Pew Research Center (2017) defines online harassment as including any of the following behaviours: offensive name-calling; purposeful embarrassment; stalking; physical threats; harassment over a sustained period of time; and sexual harassment. Online harassment may be achieved by "hacking" (illegally accessing someone's personal information/impersonating someone); "trolling" (intentionally provoking or upsetting people online); "doxing" (posting someone's information without their consent); and "swatting" (alerting police of a fake emergency) (Duggan, 2017). These behaviours contribute to the contemporary prevalence of cyber-bullying (Rainie, Anderson, & Albright, 2017).

When examined in an online educational setting, initial research suggests that disinhibition may result in desensitisation and, potentially, conflict within both student and faculty interactions, disrupting the learning environment as well as the relationships between students, faculty and program administrators (Rawlins, 2017; Xie, Miller, & Allison, 2013). For instance, educational research has examined how the disinhibition effect can result in student interactions that include incivility and hostile debate as well as the over-disclosure of personal information (Kim, 2018; Suler, 2004b; Wahler & Badger, 2016). In Suler's (2004b) study of online discussion boards, he notes that the effects of disinhibition can be benign, in that students may be more likely to engage in debate and ask questions, yet adverse or insensitive comments may also surface, thus creating toxic effects.

Suler (2004a, 2004b), the most oft-cited scholar on online disinhibition, identifies six factors that contribute to this effect: *dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination*, and *minimisation of authority*. When considered in a higher education context, these factors may manifest in online education settings. Dissociative anonymity tends to be the most cited in studies on disinhibition, as individuals can assume an anonymous or quasi-anonymous identity online, allowing behaviours to be hidden behind a virtual self who is "less known" by fellow students and faculty. For instance, many visible and social characteristics including, but not limited to age, race, gender, and disability status, may not be known in an online environment. Invisibility, like anonymity, allows individuals to do things online that they may not do in person, as they are not seen or heard, and identities are not clearly known. Invisibility may encourage individuals to be overly confident and assertive in their opinions as they do not have to worry about a physical and visual reaction. Asynchronicity is typically present, as many online education programs have asynchronous elements, including email or discussion boards. The asynchronous nature of these formats allows information to sit, which can positively allow time for reflection before response, but it can also create delays in feedback. This can become problematic in an online class if a concerning discussion post is not addressed in a timely manner or email communication not responded to. Solipsistic introjection refers to how one interprets online text communication, assigning imagined traits or characteristics to the person who created the communication. For instance, a student can project a tone while reading an online post and hence misinterpret the writer's intent. Suler's (2004a) concept of dissociative imagination describes the ways in which people may dissociate the virtual world from the "real world" and establish different norms and behaviours, thereby feeling less responsible for their virtual interactions. Finally, minimisation of status and authority can be experienced in an online environment and relates to online education where students may feel no one is "watching" them. Students may be more likely to question and speak out against online professors who may appear to possess lower levels of status and power in the online environment (Suler, 2004a, 2004b; Wu et al., 2017).

Empirical research has examined Suler's factors to explore their impact on toxic disinhibition within online learning environments. Lack of eye contact, as well as an overall "online sense of unidentifiability" in online environments has been linked to increased flaming behaviours (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Wu et al. (2017) similarly found that dissociative anonymity, moderated through deindividuation or feeling as if one's identity can be hidden online, increased disinhibited behaviour. In considering how social conflict may arise in an online educational setting, Xie et al. (2013) discuss factors that make online learning more susceptible to social conflict, such as lack of visual or audio cues that may help one sense the tone of the room/conversation. Relatedly, research has also shown that the asynchronous nature of online environments, including online course discussion boards, also correlates to toxic disinhibition and can disrupt the learning environment (Wu et al., 2017; Xi et al., 2013). Xie et al. (2013) provide a model of social conflict evolution, examining the following phases: 1) Cultural Initiation; 2) Social Harmonisation Cycle: disinhibition, tension and normalization; 3) Escalation of Conflict; 4) Intervention and Stabilisation; and 5) Adjourning. During phase 2, Social Harmonisation, online disinhibition was both benign and toxic, with students acknowledging that they were more vocal online than they would have been

in person. While this communication began as benign, toxic disinhibition manifested in "chastising" comments made about other students' level of participation or ability and then escalated to greater tension between students. Here, toxic disinhibition was found to reduce the level of learning interactions and student engagement (Xie et al., 2013). The extent and/or frequency of disinhibited communication in online educational programs is unclear and is yet to be explored in empirical research. Nevertheless, given the growing attention from educators and scholars to this issue and its potential impact on the learning environment, it warrants further investigation.

Incivility

Scholarship concerning online disinhibition relates to another emerging body of literature addressing incivility in higher education settings. Incivility in the academic environment has been defined as "rude or disruptive behaviors which often result in psychological or physiological distress for the people involved" (Clark, Farnsworth, & Landrum, 2009, p. 7). Incivility is often described in in-person classrooms as behaviours that are disruptive to the class, such as arriving late, eating during class, talking to others, texting, and being generally loud and disruptive (Knepp, 2012; Wahler & Badger, 2016). Studies looking at student perceptions of uncivil behaviours in classrooms show that students now expect a certain level of disruptive behaviour to be present (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010). In online classroom environments, uncivil student behaviours include challenging instructor authority or credibility, consumer mentality, missing deadlines, making rude, harassing, hostile, vulgar or offensive comments, academic dishonesty, and sending inappropriate emails or other communications to the instructor or other students (Clark, Werth, & Ahten, 2012; Galbraith & Jones, 2010). Scholarship concerning incivility considers student behaviour with faculty and peers, although some research looks at faculty incivility (Clark et al., 2012; Knepp, 2012). Both students and faculty are impacted by incivility in the classroom as behaviours take a toll on all, ultimately impacting on the delivery and receipt of education.

Some scholarship on incivility which, while not specifically addressing disinhibition, reveals a connection between aspects of virtual communication and incivility. Research findings in this area tend to mirror the aforementioned findings on disinhibition, suggesting online communications can encourage incivility given that interactions have greater anonymity, lack physical cues (i.e., eye contact, or body language), and are prone to misinterpretation (Clark et al., 2012; Galbraith & Jones, 2010). For instance, Clark et al. (2012) examined faculty and student perceptions of incivility in the "Incivility in Online Learning Environment (IOLE)" survey. While incivility was found to be considered only a mild to moderate problem, the identified student behaviours defined by faculty as uncivil included "name calling; making verbal insults or rude comments (83.3%); making belittling comments to others about a faculty member (83.3%); making racial, ethnic, sexual or religious slurs (83.3%); and criticizing nontraditional subcultures as avatars or vamps (82.4%)" (p. 151). The anonymity of the virtual classroom environment was found to impact the perception of how uncivil behaviours may manifest (Clark et al., 2012). More recently, McNeill, Dunemn, Einhellig, and Clukey (2017) used the IOLE to identify factors contributing to incivility in the online classroom. They included lack of connection to students and time-related dynamics, such as the desire for more immediate responses or the impact of delayed responses by instructors (McNeill et al., 2017). Similar research indicates that the

asynchronous nature of online interactions may result in a higher level of disconnect between faculty and students, allowing uncivil attacks to take place (Wildermuth & Davis, 2012).

DISINHIBITION IN THE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION CONTEXT

Social work classes often require students to confront emotionally and psychologically taxing issues, self-reflect, divulge personal experience, and engage in politically charged discussions (Cless & Goff, 2017; Fang, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, & Bogo, 2014; Lee, Brown, & Bertera, 2010). In this sense, the nature of the social work curriculum can implicitly encourage some forms of disinhibition. Self-disclosures about mental health are common in courses that focus on mental health content and psychotherapeutic interventions (Wood, Bolner, & Gauthier, 2014). Disclosures may relate to mental health concerns or diagnoses the students themselves are dealing with, or that a friend or family member may have gone through. Similarly, trauma, substance use, child abuse and other emotionally complex topics are commonplace in a social work curriculum. Opportunities for self-disclosure may occur during class discussions or as part of assignments where students are encouraged to share personal experiences or self-reflect on interactions with clients (Wood et al., 2014). Emotionally demanding topics may "trigger students" (Cless & Goff, 2017), resulting in an emotional response that can contribute to oversharing, classroom conflict or other forms of disinhibited behaviour (Robbins, 2018). The social work curriculum typically includes social welfare policy issues that are controversial in nature as well as courses addressing various forms of diversity, structural inequalities, and privilege (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Keller, Whittaker, & Burke, 2001). This highly charged social and political content in a hyper-partisan era can potentially contribute to uncivil and disinhibited behaviours (Greenfield, Atteberry Ash, & Plassmeyer, 2018). For example, Kim (2018) looked at online incivility and group dynamics within an online discussion board where individuals read an article on abortion and associated comments from different partisanship groups. Results found that diversity and differing opinions were associated with higher levels of perceived incivility (Kim, 2018). This literature collectively suggests that the potentially triggering and controversial content in the social work curriculum may fuel the disinhibition effect.

Case examples: Online disinhibition

The composite case examples introduced later illustrate disinhibition dynamics experienced by students, faculty, and administrators in a mid-sized (i.e., approximately 300 students), fully online MSW program at a state university in the eastern United States. This fully online program is asynchronous, with students responsible for reviewing audio and written lectures and readings and participating in discussion boards and smaller assignments each week. Larger assignments throughout the semester may include group work, exams, and papers. Students are responsible for meeting deadlines each week with interactions with other students primarily occurring through asynchronous threaded discussions. Faculty interact with students through discussion boards, course announcements, and individual and group feedback on assignments. Outside of the classroom, students have opportunities to engage with each other through synchronous program-led meetings/webinars, orientations, and a social media page. In the excerpts that follow, we highlight the components of disinhibition emerging in the virtual dialogue. The authors developed the composite examples

based on their collective experiences administering the program (having cumulatively taught over 35 online courses). These particular issues were chosen based upon situations or dynamics that the authors identified as particularly challenging from their own teaching experiences in social work classes, as well as from feedback received from other faculty teaching in the online MSW program. The Rutgers Institutional Review Board determined ethical review was not required for this project (Study ID PRO2019002732).

Social media example

Commonly used in US online programs, social media brings students together to network with one another and create a sense of community. In the below example of a program Facebook page, students can get immediate responses from cohort classmates about general questions, and can also share resources with one another. Program administrators can also answer questions, post announcements, resources and encouraging notes to students in a less formal environment. While the social media page is set up as a positive space for students, they may also go to social media to post negative comments about the program, classes, and instructors.

Student A: Anyone else have Professor Jones? He is the worst [*incivility; invisibility*] – I've sent 5 emails in the past 24 hours and still no response! *THIS PROGRAM IS TERRIBLE. I can't believe I'm spending so much money and no one responds to me or provides any feedback. Is anyone else experiencing this?* (Monday, 10:52pm)

Student B: Ugh. I'm experiencing the same thing! It's been 3 days and still no response. How am I supposed to get anything done if I can't get a clear answer?! I am really thinking of withdrawing. (Monday, 10:52pm)

Student A: You are? I am too. I've already been in touch with other schools who actually respond to me and I really think I want to transfer. *I deserve a response from this idiot [incivility; solipsistic introjection] who thinks he is such a great professor.* (Monday, 10:53pm)

Student C: Hey, be careful with your complaints, faculty might be reading this! (Monday, 11:00pm)

Student A: I'm just blowing off steam on the social media page, [dissociative imagination] it's not a real thing! (Monday, 11:02pm)

Student D: Oh, Professor Jones?! I'm so sorry—never take him! I can't believe they keep hiring him back. He is just making our lives miserable! This is an online program, we are working adults and chose this program for flexibility. It is ridiculous to have so much work due each week and not feel support from our professors. (Monday, 11:10pm)

Student E: That totally stinks—I've had a very positive experience in the program so far and my instructors and advisor have been very attentive to my emails. (Tuesday, 3:00am)

Student F: I agree with Student E— I've been lucky I guess! Have you tried to reach out to your professor in other ways, like the virtual office, instead of email? (Tuesday, 6:00am)

Student A: It doesn't matter; it's clear he doesn't want to answer me. [Solipsistic introjection; minimisation of status and authority] *No one cares about us in this program, you really have to advocate for yourself, there is no support.* (Tuesday, 5:00pm)

Program Director: Hi everyone, I'm sorry to those who have been feeling upset regarding particular professors or courses. I would encourage you to reach out to me directly to discuss so we can be sure to address any ongoing concerns. Your feedback is very important to me, so please send me an email to discuss further. (*Tuesday, 9:30am* [asynchronicity])

Student B: Sorry professor, we got a little carried away here (Tuesday, 10:00am).

Threaded discussion example

As discussed, threaded discussions are primary learning and engagement tools in asynchronous virtual classrooms. Conflict-fed instances of disinhibition can easily emerge as students examine controversial topics. In the following composite example, students in an online policy class discuss issues related to fraud in safety-net programs.

Student 1: *I know there are people working hard to better themselves* [solipsistic introjection] *but a lot of these people are just gaming the system.*

Student 2: Yes. Tell me about it. Like my cousin. She is so lazy and keeps having kids! Too many. Four kids when you don't have a degree, different dads….

Student 1: Ugh…people in my old neighborhood. They knew how to work it…. all the stuff, food stamps, vouchers their apartments. And they lie about how much money they've got.

Instructor: Does anyone want to chime in here? What do we know about benefit levels and "fraud" based on this week's readings?

Student 3: *I wouldn't say this in my in-person classes* [dissociative anonymity] *because everyone is so PC in social work*, but it seems like many of these people behave in certain ways that make their circumstances worse. They don't believe in honest work.

Instructor: *You're bringing up a lot of issues here. Let's break them down a bit.* [minimisation of status and authority] *What does the literature tell us about program fraud.? Other students?*

(*silence for 24 hours* [asynchronicity])

Student 2: Prof, you're wrong. Believe me. My cousin gives her kids SS number to her boyfriend so they can claim stuff, get tax money. She runs a racket.

Instructor: Hold on all, we're making a lot of assumptions based on anecdotes. I'm not trying to negate your experience, but what does the data say? Can I hear from some others about what the readings addressed this week?

Student 3: Well, the studies show that the rates of fraud in means tested programs are really low.

Student 1: No way, no way! You're wrong YOU'RE WRONG! [incivility]. I'm telling you I know people who cheat!

Instructor: Ok, your experience is important, but let's go back to the readings again. What does the data say?

Student 3: Well they also talked about how sometimes people worked off the books and didn't report it, but that was generally because they were struggling to make ends meet, not get rich.

Student 4: Well, my family got assistance while I was growing up and I hate the way people are talking about this [emotionally/politically charged topic]. My mom is a totally honest person who had a lot of hardship. This is a really awful way to speak about the people we are supposed to be helping.

Instructor: I know this is an emotionally charged topic and it impacts all of us—some more personally than others. Let's all take a deep breath, remember netiquette and how to talk to one another and continue this conversation in a respectful way.

Class email example

Email is often a primary means of communication in online learning environments, providing an outlet for students and faculty to interact with each other privately or in a group. In the following composite example, a student reaches out via email to their professor to discuss dissatisfaction with the course grade.

Initial email sent Tuesday, 10:00pm

Hey Professor,

I saw you finally posted our final grades for the class. I worked very hard all semester and for what? A grade of B? This is completely lowering my perfect GPA and is unfair. *On the final paper you took off 5 points for formatting!! This is ridiculous* [incivility; minimisation of status and authority]. I don't even know why I lost any further points on the assignment and why you gave me such a low grade.

Student X

Email follow-up sent Wednesday, 10:00pm

> Professor,
>
> *Are you going to respond to my message???*[asynchronicity, incivility]
>
> Student X

Email response sent Thursday, 9:00am

> Dear Student X,
>
> Thank you for your email and expressing your dissatisfaction with your final grade. Have you been able to take some time to review the detailed feedback I provided you on your assignment? While you covered many of the areas asked, your paper was missing a few content areas, and did not adhere to formatting. I posted instructional videos about the use of APA and the requirements in the announcements to help all students understand the structure of this assignment, and provided clear guidelines in the rubric.
>
> If you would like to set up a time to talk further to go over your grades, please let me know.
>
> Sincerely,
> Your Professor

Email response sent Thursday, 9:05am

> Professor,
>
> *It's clear you don't care about students learning, just formatting* [incivility; solipsistic introjection]. *You'll find out from your boss if I decide to take any further action.*
> I can't wait to graduate and be done with this program.
>
> Student X

DISCUSSION

Each of these case examples illustrates some aspect of online disinhibition, including Suler's (2004a) constructs, incivility within a virtual context, and emotionally and politically charged dialogue.

Dissociative anonymity: An educational setting may not afford the same level of anonymity as a general online forum where participants may not encounter one another repetitively. However, in the example of the classroom discussion board, a student recognises that they may be more protected in an online discussion than in an in-person interaction. She writes, "I wouldn't say this in my in-person class because everyone is so PC in social work…" This comment suggests that the student is more inclined to express a controversial viewpoint on

welfare use in the online forum where they experience dissociative anonymity or feel less "known."

Invisibility: Dynamics related to invisibility emerge in the social media scenario as students express some level of anger and dissatisfaction with the program, course content, or faculty role in a relatively unconstrained manner. The text-only environment contributes to a sense of invisibility, absent visual/audio cues and immediate feedback in response to their negative communication.

Asynchronicity: All three case examples occur in an asynchronous environment. By their very nature, asynchronous communications contribute to the disinhibition effect. As students may express dissatisfaction with some component of the course or program, the timeliness of response and instructor presence is essential. The social media example shows a few diss-atisfied students engaging quickly with one another and escalating their complaints as they agree about concerns. While just a few hours later other students attempt to challenge the students with accounts of their positive experiences, and a program administrator intervenes within 24 hours, the tone has already been set. A similar pattern emerges in the discussion thread where a few students monopolise the discourse with controversial and politically charged viewpoints. The instructor attempts to redirect and manage the conversation, but other students fail to respond. While the reasons for their silence are unclear, this may be less likely to occur in a synchronous setting, where the instructor could intervene with all students at the same "live" moment and more immediately manage the tone and dynamics. Finally, in the email example, as time passes between responses, the student becomes more agitated at their professor, thus impacting the overall conversation. Here, asynchronicity contributes to negative emotions and disinhibition.

Solipsistic introjection: As discussed, solipsistic introjection refers to the traits or tone one may assign to others in an online environment that is devoid of physical cues. In the social media case, as the primary student starts complaining about the program and their professor, other students begin to express agreement and fuel unsubstantiated beliefs or potential projections about the particular professor "…who thinks he is such a great professor." In this same example, the program director also attempts to intervene in what is meant to be a neutral, or supportive manner. Yet the angry student is not able to recognise this overture, as evidenced by their further comments that "no one care about us in this program."

Dissociative imagination: The social media dialogue illustrates how dissociative imagination may function. Here, a student cautions another student about how their comments might be interpreted if a faculty member reads their post, but the student dismisses this, indicating that the social media forum is not a "real thing." This virtual reality provides opportunities for students to "dissociate" from the real world, where limited responsibility is held.

Minimisation of authority: In an in-person classroom, the professor's role and authority is reinforced, as they conduct the class from the front of the room, often standing, demon-strating a level of intellectual command and physical control over the classroom. Suler (2004a) argues that in an online environment, authority figures—in this case, faculty and administrators—are often "behind the scenes" and without a physical presence. Due to this,

minimisation of their authority is prone to occur as participants speak their mind and fail to acknowledge typical classroom limits. In the class discussion board example, a student outright ignores the professor's attempts at redirecting the conversation and challenges the instructor's knowledge base ("Prof, you're wrong"). Similarly, in the email example, the student demonstrates disrespect in communicating with the professor and challenges their authority, even going so far as saying they will be contacting "their boss."

Incivility: As discussed, incivility relates to disinhibition through negative behaviours that manifest in the online classroom such as challenging instructor authority, making rude or offensive comments, and by displaying a consumer mentality. Each of the case examples exhibits a level of disinhibition driven by incivility of students. In the social media case, the first post illustrates consumer mentality (i.e., "I'm paying for this, so deserve a certain standard"—even if unrealistic), yelling of offensive comments about the program (through the use of all caps) and name-calling. In the class discussion board, the instructor's authority is challenged as noted above by the disregard of her follow-up questions. The email example also demonstrates incivility with the student challenging the professor's authority in a chain of inappropriate communications.

Emotionally/politically charged topics: The emotionally, politically charged, and often personal content discussed within social work courses can lead to intense and passionate discussion. While in some situations, the online environment may allow students to feel more comfortable discussing difficult topics, it can also quickly become heated. The discussion board exemplifies this dynamic, as students debate the "deservingness" of individuals receiving welfare, disclose personal information, and appear to be offended by one another.

Best practices for managing disinhibition

Literature on online higher education identifies a series of best practices that can be used for addressing disinhibition and incivility in online programs. In each of the above cases, the elements of disinhibition and incivility are displayed. Key elements to problem-solving include instructor presence and orienting students to netiquette/appropriate online communication techniques. Within the online social work classroom, faculty should maintain a strong instructor presence, reinforcing and modeling positive communication with students. Xie et al.'s (2013) study discussed earlier found that conflict decreased when faculty promoted a positive social climate. The case studies demonstrate instructor involvement at varying points of interaction with students. In the social media example, the program administrator makes presence known by acknowledging the concerned student within 24 hours of the initial post and provides an outlet for further discussion. In the discussion board, the instructor is regularly communicating with students, attempting to redirect the conversation back to the posed question. In the email example, the professor ultimately responds to the student, but had they responded in a timelier manner (i.e., within 24 hours), the student may have not further escalated in anger for not feeling "heard." Research stresses the importance of instructor presence in managing disinhibition and recommends faculty regularly review postings, particularly close to the due date when more activity may take place (Suler, 2004b).

Establishing clear roles, responsibilities and communication expectations of those teaching an online course will help support students so that they do not become frustrated or inappropriate in their communications. Doing so also establishes the authority of the instructor. For example, letting students know when the course instructor will provide feedback, how the instructor will participate within discussion boards, preferred methods of communication between student and instructor (e.g., email vs. virtual office), and opportunities for synchronous communication may all alleviate student anxiety (Neff & Donaldson, 2013). In the email example, the instructor redirects the student back to feedback provided, and offers different opportunities to discuss the students concerns in a more productive manner. In the discussion board the instructor is regularly involved in the discussion, attempting to promote additional student response and focusing the questions/conversation. The instructor recognises different viewpoints, but also clearly articulates that the discussion should be based on evidence from the readings, not on opinion. When a new student speaks up about how the comments previously made are offensive to them, the instructor effectively intervenes by acknowledging the impact of this discussion and reminding students about netiquette guidelines (that were likely shared at the start of the course) and how to move forward with a respectful dialogue. In the social media example, while the program administrator attempts to address the communications, the angry student disregards this, even posting that "no one cares about us," indicating that the authority of the administrator is continually being challenged. However, the presence, or authority of the administrator is felt by one of the other students who apologises for how they got "carried away," showing that instructor presence is important to maintaining the overall community of the online space.

The case examples highlight the importance of ensuring students receive information on netiquette and civil online communication during program orientations and as a regular component of each course. Doing so provides clear messaging about the communication standards of the program that can be reiterated as needed (Hopkins et al., 2017; Suler, 2004b). For example, the program director models professional communication by recognising student concerns but seeks to address them in a more productive manner outside of the public forum. This is also seen in the email example as the instructor acknowledges the students' concern about their grade, but asks clarifying questions and redirects the student's focus prior to further conversation. Orienting students from the start of the program on strategies for managing their feelings related to less than optimal grades or critical feedback is essential.

Social media presents several considerations for how to most effectively communicate with students and manage disinhibition and incivility in online communications. The literature suggests that social media can be used to develop community among online students and provides a space to support social presence of students (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018). The immediacy with which students can receive a response from classmates or others managing a page can be satisfying to students and can help to supplement the social aspect of an asynchronous program. In the social media case example, other students may be the best mediators in this situation if they are educated from the start of the program about netiquette, how to address problems productively, and how to share their own experiences in a positive way. However, if students are not oriented in this manner, the social media

page can quickly escalate into a negative forum where the purpose of engagement is not met. Programs that seek to incorporate social media as a programmatic or course element should consider the development of clear guidelines and expectations for participation in the social media application, as well as standards for administrators or faculty who monitor and respond to the posts (Ackaoglu & Lee, 2018). Policies should address social media use within the program, but also consider the impact outside of the program, including the professional, legal, ethical and practical impact of inappropriate comments (Fang et al., 2014; Karpman & Drisko, 2016).

Faculty also need to be well-trained on managing difficult and emotionally charged conversations in an on-line space. While there is a large pedagogical literature addressing this issue in the traditional face-to-face classroom (e.g., managing conversations around race, trauma, etc.) (Flaherty, Ely, Meyer-Adams, Baer, & Sutphen, 2013; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009), the literature on virtual classrooms is limited. In a course that may actively prompt student disclosures, guidelines about how to share and respond to disclosures, as well as resources for self-care should be provided at the start of the course. Consideration should be had to the productive pedagogical uses of disinhibition, as students are encouraged to share differing opinions, yet this must be done in an inclusive and civil manner. For example, the discussion board case demonstrates disinhibition as students discuss opinions not based on the research presented in the course and react negatively to the instructor redirecting the conversation through flaming and inappropriate text communications.

On a broader level, research suggests that the development of effective classroom and program management strategies for managing disinhibition within online classrooms is essential (Eskey, Taylor, & Eskey, 2014; Hopkins et al., 2017; Suler, 2004b). Schools of social work should thus consider the development of institutional policies to address expectations for virtual communications both in and outside of the online classroom. Policies may include a student code of conduct, incivility policy or rules of netiquette for engaging with students and faculty online. Current policies should be reviewed and revised as needed to include uncivil behaviours unique to the online learning environment, such as cyber-bullying (Eskey et al., 2014; Hopkins et al., 2017).

Finally, as we consider social work education and the professional and ethical responsibilities of the profession, expectations within online programs should align with the professional codes of ethics and rules of professional behavior (Reamer, 2013). Disinhibition in online education can raise ethical issues, in so far as disinhibited behaviours may violate professional ethical codes. In the US, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA) have developed "Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice," with a section dedicated to educational standards around the use of technology. These standards delineate responsibilities for social work educators within social work online and distance education, including the role of facilitating and monitoring the appropriate and professional interaction among students and maintaining clear boundaries with online communication (in the classroom and via social media). Social work educators should not only model appropriate communications with students, but also continuously

educate students about the ethical implications of unprofessional communications, including respectful language, personal disclosure, client confidentiality issues, online dual relationships on social media and other virtual platforms (NASW, ASWB, CSWE & CSWA, 2017). Clear expectations around use of technology outside of the classroom, whether at field agencies, employment settings, or on the personal level, should be addressed. Ensuring students understand how their virtual presence in their personal lives links to their professional identity as a social worker is necessary (Karpman & Drisko, 2016).

CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD

This case study adds to the literature concerning disinhibition in online learning environments. It offers one of the first examinations of this issue in the social work education literature. As schools of social work increasingly offer online course and programs (the US-based Council on Social Work Education reports 81 online MSW programs), faculty, students and administrators need to be educated about the effects of disinhibition in the online classroom (CSWE, 2019). As discussed, multiple aspects of online communications in social work programs contribute to the disinhibition effect and must be addressed for programs to be successful.

Areas for future research are considerable. Empirical research is needed to examine the specific dynamics of disinhibition in social work education and effective management practices. There is significant potential for research in this area, given the amount of existing classroom and program data. This vein of research could build a body of empirical evidence supporting best practices in the virtual social work classroom, including increasingly refined protocols and intervention templates. Relatedly, research should more closely examine the concept of benign disinhibition and the positive impact it may have on online communications, particularly in courses that include politically or emotionally charged topics. Exploring how online courses and program dynamics may contribute to benign disinhibition and encourage the appropriate sharing of diverse opinions is another needed area of research. The future of social work education largely involves online contexts and, as social work educators, we are ethically obligated to build effective, productive, and inclusive virtual classrooms.

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