

“I feel like I know you”: Using Flipgrid in Online Social Work Education

Julia Kleinschmit & Elizabeth Rembold

Julia Kleinschmit – Clinical Associate Professor, Administrator, Online and Sioux City Part-Time MSW Programs, University of Iowa School of Social Work

Elizabeth Rembold – Assistant Professor of Social Work, Department Chair, Social Work, Briar Cliff University

Address for Correspondence:

julia-kleinschmit@uiowa.edu

ABSTRACT

Online social work educators need tools to reduce social distance between students and instructors. This practice reflection describes the use of Flipgrid, an interactive social learning platform utilising video-based discussion, in online BSW and MSW programs. Instructors of two disparate courses (one focused on research practice and the other focused on discrimination, oppression, and diversity) found that Flipgrid shows promise in creating a dialogical learning environment and reducing social distance in the online space. Authors detail both how they used Flipgrid and student responses to the tool. The authors share lessons learned from using Flipgrid, and make recommendations for other teaching applications.

Keywords: *Flipgrid; Video discussion; Online education; Research; Diversity; Social justice*

INTRODUCTION

Much of the online education environment consists of didactic interactions such as webinars and recorded lectures (Militello, Tredway, & Jones, 2018). Integrating dialogical learning is crucial for students to co-create knowledge with peers and others, and decrease social distance (Garavan, 2013). Online educators often use text-based discussions to this end. However, text-based discussions are time consuming for instructors and students, can feel less authentic, and may not challenge students to use higher-order thinking (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). Further, misunderstandings in text-based discussions can result in damage to social cohesion (Clark, Strudler, & Grove, 2015).

Flipgrid (www.flipgrid.com), an interactive video discussion platform, offers promise in advancing dialogical learning goals and decreasing social distance. Video-enabled discussions allow students to see each other as classmates rather than text writers within an online discussion, increasing social presence and making collaboration easier and more productive (Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015). The platform has also been shown to increase teaching presence and help students see instructors as real people (West, Jay, Armstrong, & Borup, 2017).

Flipgrid description

Flipgrid, developed in 2012, is used in more than 20,000 classrooms and in 100-plus countries. In Flipgrid, educators create a classroom or “grid” and, within this, create topics. Social work educators have used Flipgrid to encourage students to reflect on reading, provide peer-to-peer feedback and demonstrate skills (Sage, 2018). Students respond to topics by completing video-recordings between 15 seconds and five minutes long (limit set by instructor). Students record within Flipgrid using a simple web or app-based interface on computers, tablets, or smartphones. They record and erase videos until satisfied with one they want to post to the grid. Students watch each other’s video posts and respond with more. Students can apply digital “stickers” to videos, providing fun feedback and building relationships. Educators can limit access to grids to just their students or make them accessible to anyone who has a passcode so that students can interact with people from outside the course.

Briar Cliff University BSW Program: Flipgrid and Social Work Research Methods

Briar Cliff University offers a part-time, online BSW degree-completion program. All courses are asynchronous, although practice and research courses require synchronous consultation with instructors using Zoom videoconferencing (www.Zoom.us). Students take the “Social Work Research Methods” course the semester before they begin practicum, working with identified agencies to develop research questions and proposals. Students frequently report anxiety about taking a research class and about successfully completing research proposals. Structured assignments prepare students for each section of the research proposal (Harder, 2010) and Zoom sessions with the instructor help build skills and confidence.

In the past, instructors had utilised text-based discussions to encourage students to apply content and facilitate student feedback on research questions and projects. In August 2018, Flipgrid replaced text-based discussions. Each week, students responded to up to four Flipgrid prompts posted by the instructor and responded to at least four other students’ recordings.

The instructor designed prompts to be responded to within 90 seconds. Examples of instructor prompts include:

- Discuss your understanding of the concepts of reliability and validity.
- Review the informed consent section of the NASW Code of Ethics.
How does this section apply to you as a researcher?

The instructor watched all recordings and then posted praise, correction or further probes to assist students. Using an assessment tool developed by the instructor, students graded themselves on their Flipgrid participation, providing self-ratings on degree of participation and quality of post. Students also graded themselves on the level of professionalism evident in the Flipgrid post/response, which included: respectful consideration of others' opinions; the video was recorded in a professional setting (not on bed or in public/noisy setting); and that student hair/hygiene/clothing was appropriate for a social work practice setting.

Of the 14 students in the course, two had initial technical struggles solved by a brief phone call with the instructor. One student reported spending more time practising her recording than necessary because of nerves but said she preferred Flipgrid to text-based discussions. Two students appreciated being able to record Flipgrid posts on smartphones. One student found it helpful to re-watch posts from classmates and the instructor. The average time spent by each student engaging with Flipgrid was 1.5 hours/week. Views for topics ranged from 128–476, averaging 208 views/topic.

The University of Iowa MSW Program: Flipgrid and Discrimination, Oppression, and Diversity

The University of Iowa offers an online, part-time, MSW program featuring asynchronous and synchronous courses. Students without undergraduate social work degrees must take “Discrimination, Oppression, and Diversity” (DOD), a course examining privilege and oppression and addressing institutional racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism and other topics.

Students develop awareness of their biased thoughts and actions, see how they have benefited from (or have been harmed by) privilege and oppression, and understand how, as social workers, they can and must work to address their biases and challenge structural oppression. This requires creation of a “brave space” (Arao & Clemens, 2013) because content is charged, students are actively and uncomfortably growing, and emotions run high. Flipgrid was a tool to create brave space.

Of the 17 DOD students in August 2018, three identified as male, 13 as women, one as gender-fluid. Two identified as queer, one as African-American, and one as American-Indian/Alaska Native. Five identified having a disability, and two were veterans. Ages ranged from 22–44, Median = 33.05. Students responded to Flipgrid prompts from the instructor each week and then to at least two other students to earn full discussion points. The time limit for posting and responding was five minutes; prompts were such as:

- What evidence of Christian privilege do you see in your life day-to-day? What benefits and costs do you see for yourself? For others?
- What do you think the role of social work is when it comes to religious privilege and oppression?

Students needed to post before they could see others' videos. Each week, the instructor watched all recordings and posted her own, reflecting on what students shared, guiding them through normal and difficult feelings and previewing upcoming work.

At first, students reluctantly recorded, uncomfortable being on camera and fearful of offending someone. They also were ashamed that they held biases. Before long, they were more open with ideas, experiences and emotions, and asked classmates questions about their lives and thoughts. Sometimes they gave others feedback. One student, regarding terminology, said, "I'm pushing back with love, but we don't say 'homosexual.' Please call me gay."

When the instructor asked for feedback on Flipgrid, students said they liked it and felt it was helping to build relationships. As one said about her classmates, "I feel like I know you." They reported initial stumbles in learning to use Flipgrid, challenges in editing comments to fit time limits, and technical difficulties requiring re-recording. A few students asked to alternate Flipgrid with text-based discussions because they felt writing allowed for careful construction and editing of thoughts before sharing with others. Others preferred Flipgrid because facial expression, body language, and vocal intonation made it easier to understand communication intent. Students reported being excited when receiving notifications of new videos posted in the grid, similar to interacting with other forms of social media. The average time spent by each student engaging with Flipgrid was 2.1 hours/week. Topic views ranged from 188–714, averaging 413 views/topic.

DISCUSSION

Our experiences with Flipgrid were positive. We offer lessons learned and future teaching applications.

Lessons learned

Provide clear directions for an easy start.

From the beginning, provide step-by-step directions on posting and using the mobile application. Have students create a no-stakes introductory video first. Flipgrid offers prompts such as "share something that makes you smile," or instructors could ask students to identify something they want to learn in the course.

Determine need for passcode protection.

Flipgrid offers a setting requiring a passcode each time a user views or posts. Without requiring a passcode, anyone who opens the app can enter the grid. Passcode inconvenience may be appropriate in courses such as DOD where students could share confidential information. We advise making the code simple and part of initial Flipgrid directions.

Err on the side of short videos.

The DOD instructor used Flipgrid prompts from prior, text-based discussions. They were too complex for students to address in five minutes and took the instructor three-plus hours to review the videos each week. Additionally, longer video time pressured students to script remarks, rather than informally exchange ideas.

Flipgrid in future teaching

Both instructors will use Flipgrid for purposes described here, and in the future, to engage guests outside the classroom. The research instructor will invite researchers and practitioners to engage with students about the value and use of social work research. The DOD instructor will recruit people from the community to share lived experiences. Because Flipgrid allows for ongoing conversation, interaction with outside speakers may be richer than typical, one-time “guest speaker” experiences.

The instructors plan to use Flipgrid in other courses, especially to practise presentation skills. For example, in an organisation and community practice course, students will post two-minute “elevator pitch” videos on Flipgrid and give others feedback.

CONCLUSION

Effectively teaching social work online has moved beyond “can” to “how” (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). Tools like Flipgrid can enhance dialogical education and build community, reduce social distance and elevate student engagement and learning – all necessary ingredients of effective social work education.

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