The Implications of Cyber Technology for Social Work Education

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Purpose

- Present an overview of the implications of the cyber world & cyber technology for social work & social services education
Cyber World

The cyber world has exploded in the past few years & created a new social environment for many Canadians.

Text Messaging, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr; Snapchat, YouTube, Email, Webcams, Blogs

Unprecedented opportunities to communicate …& is always advancing…
Social Media

- Use of any information & communication technologies for social interaction
  - Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn)
  - Blogs (e.g., LiveJournal, Tumblr)
  - Micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter)

- Social networks are created, maintained & facilitated by “media circuits” that make information within the circuit available to the online community

- Critical element is that social media comprise users who are active participants in providing content & interacting with others on the site
  - In contrast with more traditional media (e.g., TV, books) that deliver content to mass populations but do not facilitate creation or sharing of content by users

- Social media are about “transforming monologue (one-to-many) into dialogue (many-to-many)”
Social Networking Sites

- Web-based services that allow individuals to:
  - Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system
  - Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection
  - View & traverse their list of connections & those made by others within the system

(boyd & Ellison, 2007)
Social Media

- As of 2010, 72% of Americans aged 18 to 29 used social networking websites
  - Significant increase from 55% in 2006 & 65% in 2008

- With exponential advancement in mobile phones & other electronic devices, social media communication has evolved into a series of brief online status updates

- More & more young adults use micro-blogs to provide short & instantaneous informal updates, rather than updating via online journals or blogs
The Social Media World

- Radical increase in past decade in the use of information & communication technologies

- Use of social media continues to rise
  - 970 million unique Facebook visitors worldwide
  - 41 million unique MySpace visitors worldwide
  - 160 million unique Twitter visitors worldwide

(Google 2011a,b,c)
I'm now in the faculty of social work. What does that mean?

Codes of Ethics and Professional conduct

- Value 1: Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons
- Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice
- Value 3: Service to Humanity
- Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice
- Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice
- Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice
TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN’
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Fundamentally...

How people relate to one another has drastically changed.

Boundaries of relationships have changed with technology.
Cyber Technology & Social Work / Social Services

- Growing exponentially
- Has permeated how individuals seek support for a wide range of issues
- Increased use of information & communication technologies presents unique complexities for social workers & social service workers
- Increasingly, requirement for practice
  - e.g., criteria for posted job positions include experience with cyber counseling
Technology Use

- Youth & adults rely on information & communication technologies:
  - Social connections
  - Entertainment
  - Information
  - Personal help & advice

- Cyber communication allows clients to access & communicate with practitioners / workers with newfound ease…regardless of whether worker / practitioner gives out information
Communication & Information Technologies

- Sheer amount of information publicly available highlights this dramatic shift in the landscape of practice.

- Information a client obtains on the Internet is public.

  - “They cannot block certain aspects of their lives from their patients, & they must learn to adapt to the new world that cyberspace has created” (Gabbard et al., 2011, p. 171-172).

  - Therapists who feel invaded because of a client accessing such information must recognize & address their reactions as **countertransference for which supervision, consultation or even therapy may be required** (Gabbard et al., 2011).
Clients will Know about Worker Outside the Agency / Office…

Survey of 332 clients

- 7 of 10 clients find personal information about their therapist on the Internet
  - Google: 78%
  - Facebook: 42%
  - LinkedIn: 17%
  - Blog: 10%

- 87% found the information intentionally
- 13% found it accidentally

(Kolmes & Taube, 2011)
What sort of PERSONAL information did you discover? (Choose all that apply.)

- Family information: 60.8% (141)
- Age/birthdate: 54.7% (127)
- Education: 50.9% (118)
- Home address: 45.7% (106)
- Photos: 45.3% (105)
- Hobbies/interests: 37.1% (86)
- Dating/relationship: 31.5% (73)
- Friend information: 21.6% (50)
- Living situation: 20.3% (47)
- History: 19.8% (46)
- Previous career: 18.5% (43)
- Other (please specify): 17.7% (41)
- Likes and/or dislikes: 15.9% (37)
- Religion: 15.1% (35)
- Overlapping: 14.2% (33)
- All Other Responses: 6.7% (171)

(Kolmes & Taube, 2011)
Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education

- Current generation of youth are digital natives
- Affects format of teaching
- Benefits of Technology Use
- Significant increase in use of cyber communication even when cyber is not primary mode of treatment
Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education

- Current generation of youth are digital natives
  - Has never experienced a world without technology

- College students use information & communication technologies in their social interactions significantly more than individuals from other generations
Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education

- Affects format of teaching
- The end of instructor lecturing for a whole class
  - Use of social media, social networking sites
  - Massive Online Courses (MOOCs)
Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education

Benefits of Technology Use

- Increased accessibility
- Faster way to communicate with clients
- May provide clients with a greater sense of control, leading to more openness & less inhibition
- May help structure the upcoming session
- May forecast emerging issues
- Can strengthen therapeutic rapport
Implications for Social Work & Social Service Education

- Significant increase in use of cyber communication among professions even when cyber communication is not primary mode of treatment
  - Offers benefits & raises challenges/issues
  - Lack of research on cyber communication
    - e.g., texting, email “creeping” into traditional face-to-face clinical practice & implications
Studying the “CREEP”

- **2009**: began exploring how cyber communication has “crept” into traditional face-to-face practice

- **2009 & 2012-2013**: Focus groups & interviews with practitioners, Executive Directors & ‘new’ practitioners (N=35)

- Qualitative analysis of emerging themes & concepts related to associated practical, legal, & ethical issues

- Study is ongoing
Major Finding

The use of Information & Communication technologies has dramatically impacted traditional practice

- “It is kind of a given that emailing is part of the world. It’s not realistic for a practitioner, an agency, or anybody to say we’re not going to email.”
Initial Major Themes

4 major themes emerged from initial analysis:

1. Client Driven Practice
2. Pandora’s Box
3. Ethical Grey Zone
4. Permeable Boundaries
Theme 1: Client Driven Practice

- Clients initiated cyber communication more often, more purposefully, & more persistently than the practitioners
Theme 1: Client Driven Practice

Practitioners related client initiated emails to:

- **Client Age:** “younger clients are much more assuming that we’ll set something up by email...”
- **Client Preference:** “start where the client is at”
- **Advantages:** Complements face-to-face sessions, especially for clients with difficulty expressing themselves
- **Challenges:** Dilemma – slippery slope – “it might start with an email to change an appointment & then can shift from that to emails about issues to a crisis.”
Theme 2: Pandora’s Box

- Once cyber communication begins, it is hard to undo. Practitioners expressed concern about opening a ‘Pandora’s Box’
Theme 3: Ethical Grey Zone

- Practitioners expressed concern about not being able to ensure client (or practitioner) privacy or confidentiality, along with the associated liabilities.

- Concerns about social networking sites.
Theme 3: Ethical Grey Zone

- Agency Policy
  - Need for organization policies & codes regarding ethics
  - Organizations vary a great deal regarding policies
  - Difficulty maintaining client records without clear guidelines
  - Practitioners may decide to comply or to circumvent policy
Theme 4: Permeable Boundaries

- Clients’ choices & behaviours stretch traditional boundaries

- Using email for administrative purposes opens the door to non-administrative communication

- Potential for harm that arose

- Issues related to boundaries in practice with couples & families: notion of shared communication among all members
Initial Conclusions [2009]

- Just as information & communication technologies have shaped how people of all ages communicate, these have revolutionized communication between practitioners & clients
  - Even those engaged in traditional face-to-face therapy

- **Elements of practice affected**
  - Boundaries (time & space)
  - Disclosure of information (practitioners’ & clients’)
  - Therapeutic relationship
  - Ethical & legal issues & dilemmas
  - Policies & procedures
Initial Conclusions [2009]

Information & communication technologies have not only “crept” into traditional practice.... 
SIGNIFY A TURNING POINT
3 Years Later …

- Re-interviewed Original participants
- Interviewed new practitioners
- Social work practice transformed
Major theme: From Reaction to Intentional Use

- Reflective practice leads to learning what works & what doesn’t work
  - “Educate my instincts”
  - “Shift with the times”
  - “How is this meaningful to clients?”
  - “What is this going to mean in terms of the impact on my personal life?”
  - “How can I figure out what works?”
3 Years Later: Major Themes

1. [Client Driven Practice]: Recognizing therapeutic effects of cyber communication
2. [Pandora’s Box]: Attempt to understand & discuss the range of possible issues
3. Ethical Grey Zone
   - Educating self & clients about potential vulnerability due to lack of confidentiality
4. Attempt to address the Permeable Boundaries through explaining access & expectations
Theme 1: [Client Driven Practice]: Recognizing Therapeutic Effects of Cyber Communication

- Adjunct to sessions
- Helps client initiate agenda for next session
- Maintains the relationship between sessions
- Helps the client regulate
Theme 2: *Pandora’s Box* Attempt to Understand & Discuss the Range of Possible Issues

Theme 4: *Attempt to Address the Permeable Boundaries through Explaining Access & Expectations*

- Convey clear expectations / repeat discussion
- Separate email/Facebook for work & personal
Theme 3: Ethical Grey Zone

- Variation in agency policy & procedures
  - Some have explicit procedures & secure servers whereas others do not

- Variation in practices with other providers
  - e.g., lawyers, insurance adjusters

- Educate clients about potential vulnerability due to lack of confidentiality
Young/New Practitioners

- Seamlessly integrate technology into their practice
- View technology as a reflexive tool – valuable to the clinical relationship
- Theoretically linking technology to practice – social justice & advocacy frameworks
- Frustrated by lack of organizational endorsement & policy directives OR overly constraining policy
Executive Directors

- Recognize the ascending digital world

- Recognize the complexities of developing policies / procedures related to technology
  - Driven by professional ethics, not organizational policy
  - Limiting or supporting innovative practice
Conclusions

- Practitioners are beginning to tailor their own technology-informed practices

- It’s not whether to use or not use
  - It’s **HOW** to use technology effectively & responsibly
Must be Aware of Policies of Particular Web-Based Services

- **4.2 Restrictions.** You may not and you agree not to:
  - (d) “use the Software or cause the Software (or any part of it) to be used within or to provide commercial products or services to third parties."

- *Includes providing counseling services*
Must be Aware of Policies of Particular Web-Based Services

5.7 Content of Communications

- Skype reserves the right (but shall have no obligation) to **review content** for the purpose of enforcing these Terms. Skype may in its sole discretion **block, prevent delivery of or otherwise remove the content of communications** as part of its effort to protect the Software, Products or its customers, or otherwise enforce these Terms.

- **Includes content in counseling sessions**
  - Can monitor, delete, maintain
Questions & Issues when Posting Information Online

- What are the privacy settings of the application?
- What are the costs & benefits of posting the information?
- Understand that all posted content should be considered public & permanent
- How will the disclosure affect the relationship with clients, classmates, faculty members, colleagues, etc.?
- “Do no harm”: Is there a high probability that clients, classmates, faculty members, or colleagues will be significantly & negatively affected?

(Kolmes, 2012; Lehavot, 2009; Mostaghimi & Crotty, 2011)
Questions & Issues When Posting Information Online

- Can disclosure & actions online:
  - Threaten credibility & reputation among clients & colleagues?
  - Have consequences for career?
  - Undermine the public’s trust in the field?

(Kolmes, 2012; Lehavot, 2009; Mostaghimi & Crotty, 2011)
Engaging in Cyber Communication with Clients

▪ “When interacting with clients on the Internet, maintain appropriate boundaries of the client-social worker relationship in accordance with professional ethical guidelines just as you would in any other context.”

(American Medical Association, 2012)
Social Media

- Social media can be a very powerful communication & advocacy tool when used properly

- Maintain social media presence without jeopardizing professionalism & client confidentiality

- How social media can be used to engage clients & be incorporated into practice is still in its infancy
Conclusions

- Older & younger practitioners adjust differently
  - Older practitioners discuss guidelines & expectations
    - e.g., do not typically respond to email late at night
  - Younger practitioners respond to clients on clients’ terms
    - Respond to email at all times
    - Examine their reactions as countertransference / triggers
Conclusions

- It is not feasible to adopt & maintain a policy that prohibits cyber communication with clients
- By “creeping” into practice, information & communication technologies have extended boundaries between worker & client
- Responsible position is to examine & understand the consequences & implications in order to inform practitioner behaviour
Conclusions

- This ascendancy of the new cyber world has significant implications for social work & social service practice & education.

- Necessary for educators to prepare social work & social service students to be able to competently provide services through cyber technology.
Conclusions

• Increasing recognition that e-Therapy/cyber counseling must be offered in human service programs

• Cyber Counseling emerging form of practice with particular opportunities & challenges

• Vital that educators integrate course & practicum options for cyber counseling, to provide necessary background for students

• Important that professions examine & discuss the clinical, ethical & legal uncertainties regarding cyber counseling

• Need for further research & evaluation
Thank you

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Thank you!