

MSW Student Experiences in Online vs. Face-to-Face Teaching Formats?

David Okech, John Barner, Megan Segoshi & Michelle Carney

Institutions of higher education have embraced online formats as a new form of teaching in order to reach more students. Like other disciplines, social work pedagogy has embraced the use of online technology in higher education. As a professional and ethical responsibility, it is imperative that social work online courses are of high quality and that they meet the stated objectives. The study presented here describes students' perceptions and experiences in online and in-classroom sections in the Theories and Practice with Communities and Agencies course at a large public university in Southeastern USA. A survey was administered to the students at the end of the semester. Qualitative themes show that method of instruction as it related to course content, comfort with the level of instruction, and role of instructor in online courses affected students' perceptions of both the course and method of instruction. Discussions are directed toward improving online instruction in social work education.

Keywords: Instructor Role; Online Teaching; MSW Students; Community Practice; Technology

Introduction

Institutions of higher education have embraced online formats as a new form of teaching in order to reach more students who might otherwise not be inclined to enroll in traditional in-classroom courses. During the 2000–2001 academic year, 89% of public four-year institutions in the US offered 'distance education' courses (Tallent-Runnels *et al.*, 2006). In 2006, over 60% of all higher education institutions offered online courses and nearly 20% of students enrolled in these institutions had taken at least one class online—over 3.5 million students in total in the US (Bolliger and

David Okech, John Barner, Megan Segoshi & Michelle Carney, University of Georgia, USA

Correspondence to: David Okech, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University of Georgia, 310 East Campus Road, Athens, GA 30602, USA. Tel.: 706-542-5431; Email: dokech@uga.edu

Wasilik, 2009; Dobbs *et al.*, 2009). By 2007, the number was estimated at around 4.7 million students (Allen and Seaman, 2009).

Maidment (2005) suggested that social work is yet to join ongoing discussions on the merits of online education, while Menon and Coe (2000) wondered whether online courses as used in social work pedagogy are really effective. Clearly then, institutions should be cognizant of students' perceptions of the courses and enhance their quality in meeting learning goals as well as satisfying student expectations. According to the *Code of Ethics* of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008), service and competence are core values of the profession. These values also apply to social workers in higher education settings as well.

This study presents students' end-of-semester perceptions and experiences in asynchronous online versus traditional in-classroom sections of the *Theories and Practice with Communities and Agencies* course. The goal of the study was to assess the differences between the students' perceptions in the online and face-to-face sections. The study was conducted in a mid-sized southeastern university in the US among MSW foundation year students. The paper is organized into four main sections. The first section is a review of multidisciplinary literature on online courses and a description of the course used in this study. The next section describes the method used to collect data. This is followed by a presentation of the results in the following section, while the final section offers a discussion towards improving online courses.

Review of the Literature on Online Course Instruction

Benefits and Challenges of Offering Online Courses

Online courses provide students with an option to enroll in degree-granting programs while fulfilling obligations in other arenas of life, including family or work. They offer convenience in a world in which using the Internet is increasingly common and practical. Studies with fully-online students show that students with multiple obligations outside of the classroom were more inclined towards taking online or blended courses (see Song *et al.*, 2004; Robertson *et al.*, 2005; Young and Norgard, 2006). A majority of students who took fully-online courses reported that they did so because of time constraints in their regular schedules (Hirschheim, 2005; Young and Norgard, 2006). In a review of the literature, Rovai and Jordan (2004) found that blended courses garnered the highest ratings because of the convenient nature of being able to dedicate time to obligations other than school; however, students still placed a high value on face-to-face interactions in order to create a sense of community among classmates (Rovai and Jordan, 2004; Tallent-Runnels *et al.*, 2006).

Individual characteristics have also been shown to influence enrollment decisions in online courses. Tallent-Runnels and colleagues' (2006) review of the literature found that a majority of online students were older, highly motivated, and more focused on achieving specific learning goals. Unsurprisingly, students with more technological savvy were generally more at ease with online courses (Song *et al.*, 2004; Tallent-Runnels *et al.*, 2006). However, Dobbs *et al.*'s (2009) study with criminal justice

students found that both online and in-classroom students reported that technology was not too advanced for them and that it did not discourage them from enrolling in online courses.

In a survey of MBA students who took a similar online and traditional course, Hirschheim (2005) found that the challenges of online learning included high frustration levels; lower levels of satisfaction and interest; technical and logistical problems; lack of instructor interaction; difficulty developing student friendships; more attendance lapses; lack of feedback; confusion about class requirements; and the overwhelming volume of e-mail and online discussion. Rovai (2007) noted that online discussions can have a high number of messages being sent, misunderstandings with written text, domination of the discussion by a few students, and reduced motivations for students to interact.

As Hirschheim (2005) reported, online students felt that they ‘missed out’ on or were ‘e-solated’ from educational opportunities. Similarly, Appana’s (2008) documentation of the challenges and benefits of online formats noted that students felt that taking online courses ended up being more time consuming than in-classroom courses. These statements were somewhat different from Robertson and colleagues’ (2005) assertion that time spent online is merely perceived as greater than the time one would spend preparing for a similar class within an in-classroom format.

In a qualitative study to explore the asynchronous communication perspectives and experiences of online students, Vonderwell (2003) found that a common challenge associated with online classes is the inability of the students to develop a ‘one-on-one’ relationship with the instructor. This lack of interaction with the instructor in online courses may lead to students being overwhelmed by the need to rely on themselves (Howland and Moore, 2002). This feeling of being overwhelmed by self-reliance translated into students’ perception of being abandoned by the instructor (Howland and Moore, 2002), feelings that are referred to as being ‘e-solated’ by Appana (2008).

Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

Online course formats are as varied as traditional classroom formats. While some courses are completely online, many incorporate both online and in-classroom teaching styles. In a study to identify faculty satisfaction with online courses, Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) defined an online course as one that delivers 80% or more of the content via the Internet. Muirhead and Juwah defined interaction in online education as ‘a dialogue or discourse or event between two or more participants and objects which occurs synchronously and/or asynchronously mediated by response or feedback and interfaced by technology’ (2004 p. 13). Concretely defining what constitutes high quality in online education ultimately depends on both the perception and performance of the student (Lee *et al.*, 2011). As Petracchi noted, ‘technology ... allows instructors to adapt courses originally designed to be presented with minimal interaction between instructor and student, so that student involvement with their learning is enhanced’ (2000, p. 374).

Development of online coursework corresponds with several ideas found in both the ‘constructivist’ and ‘connectivist’ schools of learning theory, with students taking responsibility for, and steps to direct, their own learning, establishing collaborations with other classmates, and forming a dynamic interaction with the instruction and material (Allen, 2005; Kop, 2011). From these theoretical moorings, Petracchi provided a practical example from studies on online education of two large universities where ‘students indicated [that] the greatest benefit to them was a sense of control over their learning environment’ (2000, p. 374) and they were able to anticipate and correctly perceive those characteristics of online learning as conducive to their learning style.

Best Practices in Online Education

Due to individual differences in learning and expression, consideration should be made by online facilitators to create culturally conducive guidelines and promote social equity in the discussion space (Hill *et al.*, 2009; Crawford-Ferre and Wiest, 2012). Rovai’s examination of cultural differences in online learning communication explored three specific elements—‘degrees of context, directness, and face (i.e. the image one projects of oneself)’ (2007, p. 83). In the US, the dominant culture tends to be, ‘low-context, direct, assertive, and considers face less important’ (Rovai, 2007, p. 84), while other groups in the US and internationally frequently fall on the other end of the spectrum for each of those elements. For example, a study with six Chinese graduate students’ asynchronous online learning in a large urban Canadian university by Zhao and McDougall (2008) found that, though the interaction of Chinese students participating in a Western web-based course was found to have been facilitated by the asynchronous discussion format, the students also experienced challenges related to certain native norms: a regard for instructors as authoritative figures, and a caution in airing viewpoints publicly.

The lack of visual social cues in the online setting can make adjusting to new cultural paradigms more difficult (Liu *et al.*, 2010). General strategies to create a culturally sensitive online learning environment include: providing communication parameters; having a variety of dialogue formats and pedagogical activities; being aware of and addressing competitive and potentially alienating communication patterns; and privately communicating with less engaged students to identify possible recourse (Rovai, 2007). Brief learner analyses can also be conducted at the beginning of courses to inform the educator of variance in cultural backgrounds and individual learning styles and expectations (Liu *et al.*, 2010).

Though few scientifically rigorous studies have been done to assess online education strategies, some common themes have emerged in the literature. Online courses benefit greatly from: being well organized and planned; being grounded in problem-centered learning; tackling real world challenges; having assignments that vary, are collaborative, interconnect, and are evaluated with a clear grading rubric; and having student–teacher interaction that is consistent, meaningful, individualized, and regulated with clear communication guidelines and expectations (Fish and Wickersham, 2009). It is also suggested that the educator emphasize the development

of critical thinking by posing challenging questions, providing ‘tools for thought’, and creating a mechanism for teachers and peers to assess the thoughtfulness of the subsequent dialogue (Balcaen, 2011).

Facilitating stimulating discussion is a central mechanism for learning, particularly in an online educational environment (Moore, 2011). Discussion should foster comprehension, critique and construct knowledge, and share understanding (Gao *et al.*, 2009). In this effort, it is helpful for educators to provide platforms for both content- and task-oriented dialogue as well as dialogue that is socio-emotional in nature (Rovai, 2007). Clear instructions and modeling are also useful in prompting meaningful discussion (Rizopoulos, 2009).

Course Description

The *Theory and Practice with Organizations and Communities* (SOWK 6074) is a foundation MSW course designed to help students develop an understanding of social work leadership roles in social agencies and communities. Students analyze organizations and communities and predict future functioning under varying conditions; they then develop interventions that can enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the agencies as well as the optimal functioning of communities. Based on the latest Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards practice behaviors in the US (see CSWE, 2008), students were expected to demonstrate a beginning ability to use the skills, tactics, and strategies of organizing to promote empowerment, equity, and social justice; build client strengths and capacities; and reflect social work ethics and values at the organizational and community levels.

Topics on administration, team building, network building, political empowerment, community development, program planning, and social justice were also addressed. The course lasted for 15 weeks and the main assignment was a macro intervention project paper. Students planned an intervention directed at addressing a community or organizational problem. They selected an organization that works to address a problem and designed an evidence-based collaborative macro practice intervention. This project consisted of three main parts: (1) overview of existing interventions to address a social problem; (2) description of the organization’s vision, mission, and objectives as well as the organization’s strengths and limitations in addressing the identified problem; and (3) new or improved intervention designed to address the identified problem.

Students were required to show evidence of collaboration with agencies. A related core assignment was the completion of a grant proposal to fund the proposed project; both papers were submitted to the instructors as well as the collaborating agencies. The approach of this assignment followed Netting *et al.*’s (2011) social problem analysis framework. Course activities and assignments were designed to meet the stated objectives and were similar across online and in-classroom sections. In addition to the assignments, other course activities included PowerPoint lectures, class discussions, group discussions, and videos. All content and assignments were identical across the sections.

Research Question

The profession of social work, though people-centered and valuing human interactions (CSWE, 2008), has been able to use online formats in instruction to its advantage. It is important to understand how social work students perceive online education and how these perceptions can be incorporated by instructors to improve online course offerings. The goal of this study was to explore the final experiences and perceptions of in-classroom vs. online students in a *Theories and Practice with Communities and Agencies* course. The study sought to answer the following research question: what were the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of online versus in-classroom students in a macro social work course?

Method and Research Design

Study Design

The study was conducted in the fall semester of 2010 in three sections of the course. Two sections (online and in-classroom) were taught by the same instructor while another in-classroom section was taught by a separate instructor. As noted earlier, course content and assignments were similar across all three sections. Students were informed about the three sections and advised to enroll in any one of the sections during the initial orientation session. The two classroom sections met every Monday morning for approximately three hours. Students enrolled into their preferred sections and were also informed that capacities for each section could not exceed 30. This locked out some students who might have wanted to take the traditional formats, thus constraining them to the online section.

Teaching and learning in the online section was conducted through *eLearning Commons* (eLC)—a commercial virtual learning environment that is used by universities for electronic learning. The flexibility of the course design tools makes this environment appealing to both the technically novice and to the experienced developer of online courses. Instructors can add to their eLC courses various interactive tools such as discussion boards and live chat tools, along with content such as syllabi, class notes, quizzes, and grade postings. Online learning included discussion topics, presentation of PowerPoint notes, small-group discussions and presentations, and students made weekly posts and comments that were relevant to the course syllabus. In addition, both the instructor and the students posed complementary spontaneous questions or links to contemporary issues that were relevant to the course. Students accessed PowerPoint notes, videos, discussion topics, assignments, and relevant reading resources through eLC.

Part of the grading was based on the quality of the weekly posts. The instructor planned three meetings with the online section in the semester for a total of three hours to provide support on the assignments and any presenting issues related to learning or the use of eLC. While students were encouraged to attend these three sessions, they were not required to do so and there was no penalty for students who did not attend. These meetings were done on the first, seventh and final weeks of the semester. Students were

also free to meet face-to-face with the instructor during specific office hours over the semester. Communication was done through eLC. Clearly, while the course was designed as an online course, there are blended aspects through these face-to-face opportunities which were designed to provide support to the students.

Data Collection

A self-administered questionnaire with quantitative and open-ended questions capturing students' motivations, experiences, perceptions, and expectations of the formats was used to collect data at the end of the semester. The questionnaire utilized informal, semi-structured formats with four guided protocol questions. (1) Would you have taken this course if it was not required? (2) Do you think the course met the stated objectives? (3) For online students—what were the benefits or challenges of the online format? (4) What should the instructor do to make this course (and format) a great learning experience in the future? The questionnaire, though focusing on objective outcomes of the course, sought to get qualitative data on the students' experiences in the different course formats.

Qualitative responses from the three sections were then aggregated into respective word processing documents to ensure a complete transcription analysis. Respondent confidentiality was maintained in accordance with guidelines specified by Institutional Review Board (IRB) and ethical guidelines regarding qualitative studies (Padgett, 1998; Creswell, 2007). Participation was voluntary and students understood that lack of participation would not affect their course grades.

Study Sample

Out of a total of 88 students in the MSW cohort, $n = 66$ participated in the survey. The distribution by sections for the survey was: in-classroom 1: $n = 16/30$; in-classroom 2: $n = 20/30$; and online: $n = 16/28$. Classroom 2 is designated as the section taught by the instructor who also taught the online section. The study sample was 85% female, 70% Caucasian, 11% Black or African American, 4% Asian, and 2% Hispanic or Latino. Some 4% self-identified as 'other' while another 4% elected not to endorse a race or ethnicity. The age range was 22–44 years ($Mean = 25.5$). Years of social work employment or other job experience pre-MSW enrollment ranged from zero (48%) to seven (2%). General demographics of the sample, including gender, race, age, and pre-MSW enrollment work experience were comparable across all three sections.

Data Coding and Analysis

Through content analysis, we sought to develop thematic representations based upon the pool of responses. The study depicted here adopted a qualitative research methodology using an interpretative approach to data analysis and explanation rooted in grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The study used ATLAS.ti software to organize the questionnaires, compare data, enable the construction of concepts,

and eventually to formulate the overarching themes common to a majority of the respondents.

In accordance with grounded theory research, each questionnaire was reviewed and coded individually a second time for accuracy (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Many qualitative examples simultaneously contained elements of two or more categories that were interrelated. Thematic analysis techniques as described by Cohen *et al.* (2000) were also employed. These techniques included line-by-line coding, labeling of phrases or excerpts from the text with specific codes, excision of coded sections of the text, and grouping based on identified meanings associated with overall student conception of the course and its content. Finally, the codes were collated, identifying several themes and sub-themes that connected with the students' overall conception of the course.

Results

Once the qualitative themes were determined using ATLAS.ti software, one author reviewed the questionnaires and coded responses they felt illustrated the three thematic categories. Many responses simultaneously contained thematic elements that were interrelated. In these cases, a response was grouped under a particular thematic heading dependent on each student's view of it and the degree to which the theme had been defined for the student prior to course enrollment. The following excerpts from the questionnaires represent common results to the independent coding and are illustrative of the identified qualitative themes. Any and all references to persons, places, and other identifying information have been redacted from the responses printed below.

Over 80% of the respondents endorsed the importance of community practice instruction to their learning of the social work curricula and their future employment in social work. In responding to the questions, however, three cogent themes emerged. The first theme dealt with method of instruction as it related to the acquisition of community practice knowledge. The second theme encapsulated students' level of comfort (or, conversely, anxiety) as it related to either course content or method of instruction. The third explored the role of the instructor in online and in-classroom environments and its impact on student learning. Each of these themes is briefly defined and illustrated through excerpted responses below.

Instruction Method and Community Practice

A consistently high percentage (88%) of responses across all sections mentioned that content specific to the course regarding community practice greatly enhanced their understanding and appreciation of this area of social work:

I feel I have a greater understanding of the development of a community, the requirements for a community and requirements for community functioning. I will be able to better analyze social welfare policy issues by the things I have learned.
(Student, online)

I feel that community development is important. I am much more interested in helping people at a macro level because I feel problems can be solved better at the macro level. (Student, in-classroom)

Upon initial enrollment, I would not have signed up for this class because it is macro focused and I am interested in micro studies; however, I am glad this class is required as all MSW students should know the material discussed in this class. (Student, online)

Thematic elements of the responses dealt with the fact that these enhancements occurred regardless of the method of instruction (in-person or online), yet respondents endorsed markedly different views of that content, including course assignments and evaluations. Despite these differences, an overwhelming majority (96%) of all students claimed that the course was a primary influence and motivation for the student to pursue further, more formalized knowledge of community practice in their educational or career-related endeavors.

Comfort and Anxiety Over Method of Instruction

Respondents taking the online course acknowledged that the method of instruction was a significant factor to their learning, containing both positive characteristics and challenges. In addition to the qualitative excerpts included below, online respondents were asked in the second instrument whether they would, themselves, take another online course and whether they would recommend the same online course to a peer. Close to half (49%) of students taking the online course said they would take another online course in the future while 62% said that they would recommend the current course, in its online iteration, to other peers in the program. These recommendations were also couched within responses that took many of the challenges of each method of instruction into account:

I enjoyed the course, but it was difficult. After the kinks [with technology and asynchronous communication] are worked out, I think this class would be great. If asked, I would say I enjoyed the course and learned a lot but put a lot of work in and it was difficult. (Student, online)

This was a challenge, to be sure! Between the [readings and assignment] I now feel like I can at least try to engage [with community practice issues]. I look forward to growing more accustomed to social engagement. (Student, in-classroom)

It was difficult in the beginning simply adjusting and smoothing everything. I was forced to learn a lot through the discussions each week. We were practically writing small essays each week for discussion, and reading everyone's responses helped a lot. (Student, online)

Role of the Instructor and Environment in Community Practice

Many of the responses dealt with the issue of 'connecting' with the instructor and peers within the course and its relevance to course content and learning. While it is difficult to ascertain the impacts these issues had on student learning and performance, the responses clustered around perceptions of contact with the instructor and classmates as a whole in both in-classroom and online formats:

The classroom discussion was motivating and educating, and the material allowed a wonderful overview of many areas of need in the world. (Student, in-classroom)

I think because I have to drive three hours to get to [the university] this class was convenient. I also think that I was able to brainstorm and self-disclose more online than what I would have disclosed in a face-to-face course. (Student, online)

I heard about [course instructor] and was excited to take this course with them [. . .] the [instructor's explanation of the] assignments increased my ability to analyze such issues and programs, though more detailed and clearer instructions for assignments, especially the grant proposal, are necessary. (Student, in-classroom)

I would rather just see my professor weekly . . . I feel that there is more that can be learned in a traditional classroom [than online]. The advantage [convenience] of not having to be in class doesn't outweigh what could be gained in the classroom. (Student, online)

The role of the instructor and the learning environment relate directly, in the student responses, to issues of being prepared for discussions on course topics, and contributed directly to the related theme of 'anxiety' endorsed by students. As one online student responded:

I was very nervous about the [assignments] because it was difficult to get guidance when you don't meet face-to-face weekly. However, those two assignments were important to me because they pushed me to think out of the box and I learned a lot in the long run. (Student, online)

This issue evinces the need for more cohesive links to be formed between in-classroom and online curricula to create stronger ties between how coursework in community practice and other advanced BSW- or MSW-level coursework that has direct application (i.e. intermediate and advanced coursework in social policy) may be offered effectively. As analysis of these data has shown, more students appreciate the importance of the course material and view community practice as instrumental and foundational for advances in practice and policy, both in their education and future careers.

Study Limitations

This study has some limitations. While the study presents student expectations and experiences in two specified groups, the original sub-division contained three sections, with one instructor teaching two sections and another one teaching the remaining classroom section. Instructor effects are therefore not factored in the findings here. However, the instructors discussed the need to present the sections in as similar fashions as possible, meeting often and sharing experiences to enhance the integrity of the research project. Despite these methodological limitations, this study informs the provision of quality online courses to social work students.

Discussion

This study compared the experiences and perceptions of online and in-classroom sections of MSW students in a *Theories and Practice with Communities and Agencies*

course at the end of a semester. Generally, the literature shows that students' enrollment into online courses is influenced by convenience. In addition, online formats are as varied as traditional classrooms and it is important to be cognizant of social, spatial, and cultural issues that might influence online learning.

The students did not differ significantly based on different socio-demographic as well as individual characteristics. Since there was a wide range in the age variable, it would have been expected that the online section would be slightly older than the in-classroom section. This finding may be a result of the differences in the sample sizes across the sections. Still, the fact that age was not significantly different between the two groups is an interesting finding. This result may probably have been different if the online section contained part-time students; all the students in this study were registered as full-time students. Older part-time students are more likely to have families, children, or job commitments that make online courses convenient for them.

The results across all sections identified three themes which show that instruction method, course content, and the role of the instructor are important considerations in students' perceptions about a course. Students from both sections reported comparable satisfaction with course content and the online students did not think that the mode of instruction hindered them from learning. As mentioned earlier, nearly all students claimed that the course in itself was a primary influence and motivation for them to seek advanced knowledge of community and agency practice in their educational or career-related endeavors.

A more interesting theme for this study was the response concerning comfort with online formats of instruction and how this affected student perceptions and learning experiences. Students in the online section indicated both the benefits and challenges of taking courses in this format that were consistent with our review of the literature. For example, students felt they worked hard, learned a lot from compatriots, and were glad, as micro-focused student, that the macro course was required. However, they also complained about issues with technology and the feeling that the online section took a lot of their time and was laborious. The issue of a busy schedule for the course was also mentioned by students in the in-classroom section.

Clearly, for students who might be new to online formats, it is important that their anxiety is reduced by all means possible. One way of doing this is to ensure that the technology being used is friendly and accessible. Adjustment issues at the beginning of the course should be addressed immediately to set a more conducive atmosphere for learning, with students knowing that though e-solated, the instructor is concerned and responsive to both their learning as well as their comfort with the technology in use. Obviously, the issues raised by Fish and Wickersham (2009), including organization, clarity, and rooting learning to real life experiences, are also critical.

Finally, learning is not only about the medium, course, content, and the students; instructors play a major role in student learning. In both formats, students pointed to the need to 'connect' with the instructor. Clearly, this is more natural in a traditional classroom setting. Students expressed a desire and satisfaction to take the course with the instructors and also enjoyed interaction with fellow students. Some online students noted that they would have preferred to 'see their instructor' and thought there was

more to gain by being in a traditional classroom. Not surprisingly, other online students liked the flexibility of not having to commute to a classroom and also being able to self-disclose more, thus enriching learning through classroom discussions.

In conclusion, some lessons learned in offering online courses in macro practice showed that students appreciate the 'offline' learning opportunities, including meeting with the instructor and working with communities and agencies on class projects. When offered alongside in-classroom sections, instructors should note that online students will often consult with their in-classroom counterparts to check if the contents and teaching materials or resources are similar. Therefore, if a guest speaker lectures in the in-classroom section, a video should be uploaded for the online section promptly. Anecdotal evidence from quantitative data collected at the end of the semester showed that the sections met the stated course objectives, with most scores registering over seven points out of a total of 10. Further anecdotal evidence from formal course evaluations revealed that the in-classroom students rated the course slightly higher than the online students. However, formal course evaluations from the 2011 cohort showed a reversal of the findings, with the online students rating the course slightly higher than the in-classroom students in the same course. Evidently, as instructors teach more online courses and as they incorporate student feedback, students are likely to express improved satisfaction with the online method of instruction.

References

- Allen, A. (2005) 'Online learning: constructivism and conversation as an approach to learning', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 247–256 [online]. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01587910500167985>
- Allen, I. E. & Seaman, J. (2009) 'Learning on demand: Online education in the United States', Babson Survey Research Group, The Sloan Consortium [online]. Available at: sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/pdf/learningondemand.pdf
- Appana, S. (2008) 'A review of benefits and limitations of online learning in the context of the student, the instructor, and the tenured faculty', *International Journal on E-Learning*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 5–22 [online]. Available at: <http://www.aace.org/pubs/ijel/>
- Balcaen, P. L. (2011) 'The pedagogy of critical thinking: object design implications for improving students' thoughtful engagement within e-learning environment', *US-China Education Review B*, vol. 3b, pp. 354–363.
- Bolliger, D. U. & Wasilik, O. (2009) 'Factors influencing faculty satisfaction with online teaching and learning in higher education', *Distance Education*, vol. 30, no. 10, pp. 103–116.
- Cohen, M. Z., Kahn, D. L. & Steeves, R. H. (2000) 'How to analyze the data', in *Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research*, eds M. Z. Cohen, D. L. Kahn & R. H. Steeves, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 71–83.
- Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). (2008) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* [online]. Available at: <http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=13780>
- Crawford-Ferre, H. G. & Wiest, L. R. (2012) 'Effective online education in higher education', *The Quarterly Review of Distant Learning*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 11–14.
- Creswell, J. (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 2nd edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Dobbs, R. R., Waid, C. A. & del Carmen, A. (2009) 'Students' perceptions of online courses: the effect of online course experience', *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 9–26 [online]. Available at: <http://www.aect.org/intranet/publications/QRDE/subguides.html>

- Fish, W. W. & Wickersham, L. E. (2009) 'Best practices for online instructors: reminders', *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 279–284.
- Gao, F., Wang, C. & Sun, Y. (2009) 'A new model of productive online discussion and its implications for research and instruction', *Journal of Educational Technology Development & Exchange*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 65–78.
- Hill, J. R., Song, L. & West, R. E. (2009) 'Social learning theory and web-based learning environments: a review of research and discussion of implications', *American Journal of Distance Education*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 88–103.
- Hirschheim, R. (2005) 'The Internet-based education bandwagon: look before you leap', *Communication of the ACM*, vol. 48, no. 7, pp. 97–101 [online]. Available at: <http://cacm.acm.org/>
- Howland, J. L. & Moore, J. L. (2002) 'Student perceptions as distance learners in Internet-based courses', *Distance Education*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 183–195.
- Kop, R. (2011) 'The challenges to connectivist learning on open online networks: learning experiences during a massive open online course', *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 19–38.
- Lee, S. J., Srinivasan, S., Trail, T., Lewis, D. & Lopez, S. (2011) 'Examining the relationship among student perception of support, course satisfaction, and learning outcomes in online learning', *The Internet and Higher Education*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 158–163.
- Liu, X., Liu, S., Lee, S. & Magjuka, R. J. (2010) 'Cultural differences in online learning: international student perceptions', *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 177–188.
- Maidment, J. (2005) 'Teaching social work online: dilemmas and debates', *Social Work Education*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 185–195.
- Menon, G. & Coe, J. (2000) 'Technology and social work education: recent empirical studies', *Research on Social Work Practice*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 397–398.
- Moore, D. (2011) 'Using collaborative online discussion effectively for teaching', *Journal of Applied Learning Technology*, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 19–23.
- Muirhead, B. B. & Juwah, C. C. (2004) 'Interactivity in computer-mediated college and university education: a recent review of the literature', *Educational Technology & Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 12–20.
- National Association of Social Workers (NASW). (2008) *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*, NASW, Washington, DC.
- Netting, F. E., Kettner, P. M. & McMurtry, S. L. (2011) *Social Work Macro Practice*, Pearson Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA.
- Padgett, D. (1998) *Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Petracchi, H. E. (2000) 'Distance education: what do our students tell us?', *Research on Social Work Practice*, vol. 10, pp. 363–378.
- Rizopoulos, L. (2009) 'Using online threaded discussions: best practices for the digital learner', *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 373–383.
- Robertson, J. S., Grant, M. M. & Jackson, L. (2005) 'Is online instruction perceived as effective as campus instruction by graduate students in education?', *Internet and Higher Education*, vol. 8, pp. 73–86.
- Rovai, A. P. (2007) 'Facilitating online discussions effectively', *Internet and Higher Education*, vol. 10, pp. 77–88.
- Rovai, A. P. & Jordan, H. M. (2004) 'Blended learning and sense of community: a comparative analysis with traditional and fully online graduate courses', *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 1–13 [online]. Available at: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl>
- Song, L., Singleton, E. S., Hill, J. R. & Koh, M. H. (2004) 'Improving online learning: student perceptions of useful and challenging characteristics', *Internet and Higher Education*, vol. 7, pp. 59–70.

- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Tallent-Runnels, M. K., Thomas, J. A., Lan, W. Y., Cooper, S., Ahern, T. C., Shaw, S. M. & Liu, X. (2006) 'Teaching courses online: a review of the research', *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 76, no. 1, pp. 93–135 [online]. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3700584>
- Vonderwell, S. (2003) 'An examination of asynchronous communication experiences and perspectives of students in an online course: a case study', *Internet and Higher Education*, vol. 6, pp. 77–90.
- Young, A. & Norgard, C. (2006) 'Assessing the quality of online courses from the students' perspective', *The Internet and Higher Education*, vol. 9, pp. 107–115.
- Zhao, N. & McDougall, D. (2008) 'Cultural influences on Chinese students' asynchronous online learning in a Canadian university', *Journal of Distance Education*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 59–79.

Copyright of Social Work Education is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.