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# Lessons Learned From Using Adobe Connect in the Social Work Classroom

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### Lessons Learned From Using Adobe Connect in the Social Work Classroom

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## ***BRIEF REPORT***

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### **Lessons Learned From Using Adobe Connect in the Social Work Classroom**

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*Adobe Connect is synchronous web conferencing software available to colleges and universities. This pilot study sought to understand student and faculty participation in use of this software as part of an already established hybrid master's level social work curriculum. This software was utilized in two courses: concentration year field practicum and advanced social work practice. Student feedback and satisfaction are presented. Lessons learned for using such software are explored.*

**KEYWORDS** *Adobe Connect, asynchronous learning, online learning, social work curriculum, synchronous learning*

As social work programs admit increasing numbers of persons employed full-time into their student ranks, there is a need for the development of alternative learning modalities that will allow students to learn in the most time and cost efficient manner available. Many universities are developing online or web-enhanced programs to effectively respond to the needs of their adult student learner communities (O'Donoghue, Singh, & Dorward, 2001). Within the United States, 99.5% of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs and 100% of Master of Social Work (MSW) programs surveyed reported delivering at least one course utilizing distance education technologies (Vernon, Pittman-Munke, Vakalahi, Adkins, & Pierce, 2009).

This report describes the piloted use of Adobe Connect synchronous software in two MSW courses: Field Practicum and Advanced Practice. It was hypothesized that students would be more pleased with the

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synchronous learning technology than asynchronous learning technology currently used in this hybrid program. The lessons learned should be helpful for any collegiate program faculty planning to incorporate synchronous web conferencing software as a teaching tool.

### ADOBE CONNECT ENHANCED COURSE CHANGES

This MSW program includes hybrid courses with both face-to-face and online course delivery methods as well as 100% online courses. The Adobe Connect enhanced courses were redesigned to include synchronous online meetings. None of the course content was changed for the Adobe Connect enhanced sections; delivery mode was the only difference. Advanced practice is a hybrid course with six 4-hr face-to-face sessions on Saturdays throughout the semester. In addition, students participate in asynchronous learning components such as discussion board postings, podcast applications, videos, YouTube and taped lectures (Tegrity). Face-to-face sessions include simulations, lecture, and group work.

The Advanced practice course exchanged two of the 4-hr face-to-face sessions with two online sessions in an Adobe Connect classroom. Typically, students present a family case face-to-face in the classroom; however, in the Adobe Connect enhanced section, students presented a family case online using Adobe Connect. The Adobe Connect online sessions were preceded by a 30-min face-to-face tutorial that occurred during the previous regular class time. In addition, students had a choice of two different online session times to become acquainted with the software. These sessions were outside of class times.

Typically, field practicum students are expected to complete 250 field hours at his or her assigned social work practicum agency in the spring semester. The field liaison makes phone contact at the beginning of the semester and a face-to-face contact at both midterm and final evaluation. To encourage the linkage of field to class material, students completed six online learning assignments posted via the discussion board on the blackboard learning management system.

The Adobe Connect enhanced field course was redesigned to exchange the six online learning assignments for six 2-hr Adobe Connect meetings or field seminar. The same field topics were covered in the typical and Adobe enhanced sections. Additionally, after discussion of the selected weekly topic, the class would discuss difficult situations in field during that particular 2-week period. Students were given the option to meet with the professor as needed to ask questions or discuss concerns after the online class session.

### SATISFACTION SURVEY FINDINGS: LESSONS LEARNED

Satisfaction surveys were used to assess the Adobe Connect enhanced sections of these courses. The survey contained questions rated on a Likert

**TABLE 1** Descriptive Statistics

Question Item	Mean
Q1: I set up Adobe Connect without difficulty.	3.9048
Q2: Adobe Connect had few technical problems.	3.2381
Q3: Adobe Connect allowed for more personalized attention with my professor.	3.2857
Q4: Adobe Connect allowed for increased connection with my classmates.	3.5714
Q5: I found the learning curve on Adobe Connect minimal.	3.4762
Q6: I prefer Adobe Connect to blackboard discussion boards.	4.4286
Q7: I prefer Adobe Connect to Tegrity lectures.	4.281

scale and open-ended questions. In the Advanced Practice and the Field Practicum courses, the students in the Adobe Connect enhanced sections were asked to complete a survey following completion of these courses comparing their experience in these courses using Adobe Connect with experiences in other hybrid courses in their Master's curriculum (see Table 1).

A Likert scale of 1–5 was used (1 [*strongly disagree*], 2 [*disagree*], 3 [*neither agree nor disagree*], 4 [*agree*], and 5 [*strongly agree*]). Descriptive statistics provided means scores that ranged from 3.23 to 4.42. The higher the mean the more students agreed with the question item.

The highest means were found on preferring Adobe Connect to discussion boards ( $m = 4.42$ ), preferring Adobe Connect to Tegrity lectures ( $m = 4.23$ ), and setting up Adobe Connect without difficulty ( $m = 3.9$ ). These means suggested that setting up the equipment initially is not difficult. As well, it appears that students prefer Adobe Connect capabilities to the other online methods (i.e., discussion board, taped lectures) used at this particular university.

The open-ended questions on the student satisfaction survey were tracked to examine themes from students for both the field and advanced practice class. These are summarized below in Table 2 and are the basis for forming the lessons learned from this study.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM STUDENTS

The student satisfaction survey in this study provided a variety of lessons that can be used in graduate program settings to improve the delivery of online classes.

In this particular study, the 4-hr session of Adobe Connect was determined to be too long by both faculty and students. The 2-hr session of the Field section was found to be a much more appropriate length for online learning. As a result, it is suggested that online sessions be set around a 2-hr time period. This allows for plenty of content delivery before students become inattentive.

**TABLE 2** Open Ended Questions

Question	Emergent Themes
What were your favorite parts of Adobe Connect?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Face to Face Contact</li> <li>● No Driving to Class</li> <li>● Being in Comfort of Home</li> <li>● Consultation with Professor and Peers</li> <li>● Use of New Technology</li> <li>● Less Anxiety Presenting Online</li> </ul>
What were your least favorite parts of using Adobe Connect?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Technical Difficulties</li> <li>● Purchasing New Product Only for this Class</li> <li>● Feeling Less Attentive</li> <li>● Connectivity Issues</li> <li>● Length of Class (4-hr Practice class)</li> <li>● Late Meeting Times (Field)</li> </ul>
How would you change the use of Adobe Connect to improve this class?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Class Demonstration of Equipment</li> <li>● Online Test of Equipment before Class</li> <li>● Improve Compatibility Issues</li> <li>● Smaller Practice Classes (12 maximum)</li> <li>● Shorter Classes (1–2 hr)</li> <li>● Online Class Days Saturdays Only (typical day for this program)</li> </ul>
How would you suggest combining Adobe Connect, Tegrity and Blackboard?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tegrity (taped lectures) for Supplemental Information, Difficult Concepts, Missed Classes</li> <li>● Adobe for 100% online without Tegrity</li> <li>● Decrease discussion boards on Blackboard</li> <li>● Increased use of Adobe to increase interaction with students and professors</li> </ul>

Students appeared to have difficulty setting aside focused class time from interruptions in the home environment. Students were more likely to take breaks to use the restroom, get food, and deal with problems at home concerning pets, children, and partners. Expectations concerning focused class time must be addressed in the syllabus. This should include how to handle interruptions and keep breaks at a minimum.

Technological difficulties were a challenge for some students. Students had to purchase the correct equipment, learn how to attach this equipment to his/her computer, and then effectively use a webcam, USB headset, and the various Adobe Connect functions. Although there was an initial online meeting in the Adobe connect online classroom to check equipment, some students required additional coaching from both the professor and other students in order to participate fully in the synchronous learning environment. Perhaps taking the student advice for a face-to-face training session followed by an one-half hr online equipment check would be most beneficial. For programs where a face-to-face meeting might not be possible, this initial training session could be completed via a pretaped module.

Another main component for consideration centered on what types of online technology appear most helpful to the student. The student theme suggested that completely online classes should be provided via synchronous web conferencing software such as Adobe Connect to increase

interaction between students and professors. Discussion board applications were not seen as providing the level of interaction students desired. However, in hybrid courses where there are six face-to-face sessions, it is suggested that more consideration be given to when to use taped lectures (Tegrity) versus other asynchronous methods. Students prefer the use of taped lectures for difficult concepts and missed class situations.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM PROFESSORS

Although much of this report has focused on the student benefits and challenges using Adobe Connect, it is important to also note the challenges for professors. Professors must clearly state online expectations for students in the class syllabus. Ideas to include in the syllabus include: description of appropriate dress, policy on online attendance, rules concerning “side chats” during class, online participation expectations, and expectations on staying focused on topic under discussion.

While planning your class meetings, it is suggested that you meet face-to-face or have a taped lecture that has an overview of the software. This should involve a concrete step-by-step tutorial from downloading the software, to logging on, to use once on the system. After the initial training, plan multiple practice session time slots to have students check equipment such as microphones and webcam. This makes sure that the students have purchased the USB required headset as well as allows for physical practice of how to use the equipment with the professor. During this check in, have students practice basic functions that you will need in your class (i.e., raising hand, downloading material, typing in the chat box, talking when called on). It would also be prudent to use features such as polling, chat box answering, and raising hands on a sporadic and unpredictable basis in order to monitor student attentiveness during your class meetings. A final consideration is on whether to tape your class sessions. This may or may not be appropriate considering the level of confidentiality needed based on class content.

Technical support is a final consideration for the professor. It is important to have a contact for technology problems (both during work hours and after work hours). Provide the information technology numbers to students in the syllabus and your online site as the experts on the software. Refer students to those supports regularly rather than attempting to solve technical problems during your class time. Obtain continuing education classes from information technology at your university and/or the Adobe Connect software company.

### DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Construct validity is important to consider when assessing distance education. Quinn (2011) discusses a multivariate approach to researching social

work education. Quinn's approach includes student, setting, educational content, and expected educational outcomes as four operational indicators that when adequately captured can improve the understanding of distance delivery in social work education. Attention to these factors would have improved this study. For example, when looking at the student variable, additional demographic data such as life roles, gender, rural or urban residency, and access to high speed internet could have been gathered to determine their impact on attitudes about the use of Adobe Connect.

There were limitations to this particular study design. This post-test only design was unable to assess any change on the part of the students. A pretest and post-test design would allow analysis on change in attitudes towards synchronous learning or skill level in using Adobe Connect software. It would have been advantageous to collect data from students in regular hybrid and regular online courses for comparison purposes particularly if random assignment occurred. These changes and additions to the research plan would strengthen the research design.

#### FUTURE SOCIAL WORK TEACHING CONSIDERATIONS

Some professors of social work remain hesitant to offer classes in an online format. This hesitancy seems to increase when thinking of placing practice courses online (Maidment, 2005). Although professors might struggle with how to pedagogically offer a practice course online, this is being done at more institutions of higher learning (Vernon, Pittman-Munke, Vakalahi, Adkins, & Pierce, 2009). Although professors may disagree about what to offer online, there may be agreement on the fact that online learning does open up the availability of higher education to those in rural areas and foreign countries (Johnson, 2005).

The results of this study demonstrate that the students in this study were satisfied with the use of Adobe Connect in the social work classroom. Although technological difficulties and learning the technology were found to be problematic for some students, this was not found to be a barrier to use. Particularly interesting is the fact that students preferred Adobe Connect to the asynchronous software currently used by this MSW program. According to the students in this study the benefits of synchronous online learning outweigh the challenges.

With some minimal planning and training, these methods can be successfully utilized in the social work classroom. In an era of budget shortages and full-time students working full-time jobs, online learning makes sense. Online distance education, via a combination of synchronous and asynchronous methods, insures that social work education is accessible to those in rural or international locations lacking educational resources (Johnson, 2005; Rao, 2008).



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