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ABSTRACT

A century ago, Abraham Flexner offered his perspective on the nascent field of social work, describing the field as educationally unfocused, too diversified in its practices, and too relational or assistive to other fields to meet the criteria for professional status. Using the example of the imperative to integrate information and communication technologies (ICT) into social work practice, we examine the ways these 100-year-old challenges persist as well as how they are being challenged and reworked. Drawing on three central themes from Flexner—education, diversity of professional settings and functions, and the relational nature of the work—we examine the absence of ICTs in social work practice, arguing that a lack of curricular exposure to ICT tools, strategies, and thinking at the BSW and MSW levels and a failure to incorporate these technologies with clients, agencies, and communities leads to a damaging disjunction between professionals and a changing culture. We suggest that the challenge proffered to social work by technology provides a radical opportunity to create a more socially just practice, offer a preliminary list of best practices for approaching ICT integration, and make suggestions for further inquiry.

One hundred years ago, Abraham Flexner (1915) addressed the National Conference on Charities and Correction, giving his definition of a profession and arguing that the emerging field of social work practice did not meet his criteria:

... Professions involve essentially intellectual operations with large individual responsibility; they derive their raw material from science and learning; this material they work up to a practical and definite end; they possess an educationally communicable technique; they tend to self-organization; they are becoming increasingly altruistic in motivation. (Flexner, 1915, p. 14)

This pronouncement, offered by an education reformer who transformed modern medical education, has preoccupied social work for the past 100 years, encapsulating a variety of persistent anxieties about the intellectual authority of the discipline, its social status, and the efficacy of its practice. Flexner’s pronouncements echo forward to pedagogy: Almost every aspiring social worker is confronted with his address as a prompt to historical reflection within the first months of training. As Morris (2008) stated, “Social work has never gotten over Flexner” (p. 32).

Flexner (1915) defined social work as an outsider, using what Popple (1985) describes as the “dysfunctional paradigm” of the “traditional sociology of professions,” (p. 560), and Flexner’s assessment has provided 100 years of impetus for the discipline to define its own unique intellectual territory, independent of its heritage in the institution of charity, friendly visiting, and case management, its proximity to other professional fiefdoms, or its social utility. A century later, it is clear that the proprietary fundament of social work is the unique lens of person-in-environment, the commitment to look beyond distress resident in the individual, or to catalog situational stressors and to study instead the dynamic interplay between actor and ecosystem (Saari, 1992; Ungar, 2002).
If we understand social work’s distinctive intellectual framework in this way, as a commitment to create the conditions of productive interchange between individuals and their environment, then the current proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICT) demands an immediate and pervasive reconstitution of practice. Technology has altered each component of the social work equation: redrawing the human environment, altering our notions of self, and profoundly unsettling the fit of individual into context. Change of this transformative magnitude has to be pursued, researched, and accommodated by the discipline at every level—micro, mezzo, and macro—across the broad range of practice contexts.

Imbuing seismic change into a long-established practice is daunting, yet it offers social workers, collectively and as individuals, a chance to reconsider the mechanisms of social work and their congruence with the specified ethos of the discipline. In nearly a century since the inception of formalized social work, pioneers such as Mary Richmond have urged the adoption and incorporation of new technologies, from machinery to novel theoretical models and research techniques, to invigorate practice and to approach the ideal of empowering individuals and communities (Popple, 1985; Reid, 2001). This article uses three dimensions derived from Flexner (1915) to interpret the challenge proffered to social work by technology as a radical opportunity to create a more socially just practice. Drawing on Flexner’s emphasis on education and his identification of the themes of diverse areas of practice and relationships as central to social work, we consider some of the opportunities for invigorating the integration of technology across social work then describe briefly some impediments, ultimately offering a framework of best practice for embarking on this endeavor.

**Technology, ethos, and social work: Where are we now?**

Flexner’s (1915) address was delivered at a time of cultural reorganization around changing social patterns. Stuart (2007) describes the context of Flexner’s address as a historical moment similar to our own technologically charged contemporary milieu.

Social classes, though increasingly interdependent, had little contact with each other as urban areas became increasingly differentiated. The economy was becoming globally integrated, as labor, capital, and markets became more mobile in response to improvements in transportation and communication technology. (p. 3)

Such rapid evolution of the social environment, prompted in Flexner’s time by industrialization and today by the rapid adoption of fast-evolving technologies, challenges the social map of responsibility and interconnection, dissolving and reassembling units of community, idioms of association, and ideas of the self (Cerulo, 1997).

In our current human moment, the concepts culture coalesces around—individuality, inclusion, networks, ownership, and accountability—are in flux. Echoing the changes observable in Flexner’s own milieu, the tools we use to perceive and describe reality are undergoing constant, rapid, and market-driven revision. The discipline of social work, focused on the intersection of individual and environment and committed to ensuring the imperative of social justice in an evolving society, is uniquely positioned to articulate this change as it takes place and to facilitate a conversation about how a global shift in values can be transacted to minimize injustice and to increase equity and access to resources.

Technology is everywhere. We no longer need to develop new skills, cultivate an understanding of digital processes, or even elect to participate to be incorporated into a ‘connected society’ defined by Westlake (2012) as “information passed from and to us in a simple, intuitive and contextually aware way without (our) needing to understand computers, the internet and being connected.” Many primary functions of modern life are now transacted in the online and mobile realms, from tasks such as purchasing groceries and banking, to complicated professional interactions including psychotherapy and records management, to nuanced relational experiences such as searching for a partner or joining an affinity-based community. In the developed world, the permeation of modern life by ICTs is so extreme it is becoming invisible.
The uses of ICT are accelerating across micro, mezzo, and macro contexts of social work (Beaulaurier, 2005; Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012), whereas a parallel mental health industry is mushrooming in the mobile universe, propagated for profit and sustained so far by consumer demand. Yet, despite this proliferation within and beyond the profession, no systematic effort has addressed how the active skills of ICT use can be presented to, manipulated, or critiqued by faculty, students, and those in the field. The Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice issued by the National Association of Social Workers and the National Association of Social Work Boards (NASW & ASWB, 2005) do not advocate any specific training, urging, broadly, that “social workers should acquire adequate skills that use technology appropriately, and adapt traditional practice protocols to ensure competent and ethical practice,” (p. 4). There are few established conduits for technological learning in social work. People in other disciplines have recognized the importance of ICT and consider it to be a key part of professional development (Perron, et al., 2010). Yet fewer than 10% of social work programs across the country offer a formal course of any type on ICT, whereas the technology standards address the intersection of continuing education and technology by elucidating guidelines for obtaining technology-mediated continuing education units (NASW & ASWB, 2005).

In the field, the current interpretation of the capacity of technology is persistently narrow; ICTs are deployed primarily to speed and enhance existing bureaucratic functions or to augment existing therapeutic and case management activities without challenging the assumptions or models that underlie these practices (Hill & Shaw, 2011). In the professional arena, technology is a means to strengthen established protocols and existing dynamics of power rather than a reimagination of either (Henman & Adler, 2003). ICTs are typically adopted by agencies (among the largest providers of social work employment and services) as tools “for monitoring and managing service delivery” (Parrott & Madoc-Jones, 2008, p. 181) rather than looked to as a strategy for innovation or for calibrating practice to hew more closely with the ideals of individual empowerment and collective social justice (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). Professional social workers’ experience of technology is primarily linked with data entry and management (Nonprofit Technology Network [NTEN], 2012), often a demotivating encounter with proprietary systems required by the organizations and agencies where they work (Hill & Shaw, 2011).

The failure to consider the transformative properties of technology continues a long history of suspicion and late adoption (Beaulaurier, 2005; Sapey, 1995). The phenomenon of resistance to the incorporation of technological change has historical roots in social work, and this antipathy was first noted by the pioneering social worker Mary Richmond when she urged turn-of-the-century social workers to exploit her era’s novel technology—the telephone—to better serve clients (Marson, 1998). Beginning with Richmond’s (1917) analysis of the utility of the telephone for casework, technology has been acknowledged as useful, derided for its potential to fail, and avoided because of concern that its use could sabotage the relationships central to practice. Over time, calls from those within the discipline—including Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge in the 1920s, Dick Schoech in the 1980s, and most recently by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)—have urged technological uptake to secure associated advances in practice. Yet technology is still not infused in any meaningful way into social work curricula, and practitioners making active use of ICTs are largely innovating autonomously, independent of established structures of knowledge transmission within the discipline (Beaulaurier, 2005; Mishna, Bogo, Root, & Fantus, 2014; Perron et al., 2010).
Technology-enabled opportunities for moving closer to just practice

Education: Learning innovation and critical thinking

For Flexner (1915), knowledge conveyed by professional training ultimately enables practice that is responsible and creative:

Men arrive at an understanding as to the amount and quality of training, general and special, which should precede admission into the professional school; as to the content and length of the professional course. These formulations are meant to exclude from professions those incapable of pursuing them in a large, free, and responsible way; and to make sure that those potentially capable are so instructed as to get the fullest possible benefit from the training provided. (p. 8)

Four distinguished leaders in social work spoke in response to Flexner at the conference where he gave his address. According to Popple (1985), “Jeffrey Brackett, Edward T. Devine, George Mangold and Porter R. Lee all argued that social work must narrow its focus and develop an educationally communicable technique in order to become accepted as a profession” (p. 564). This emphasis on a transmissible strategy of intervention has shaped the past century of social work curricula, as the discipline worked to model itself after science, manufactured standards, and amassed theoretical models and intervention protocols to attain the coveted privilege of the established profession, that is, according to Freidson, to “gain(s) control over the determination of the substance of its own work” (as cited in Popple, 1985, p. 562).

Flexner’s (1915) ideal of learning as the root of pursuing later work in a “large, free and responsible way” (p. 8) boldly describes the potential to use the meaningful incorporation of technology into teaching and learning as an occasion to rethink the training of social workers at all levels, replacing a model of the transmission of a static body of accrued expertise with the goal of teaching the dynamic skills of innovation, improvisation, and critical thinking and reflective awareness. Such reconceptualization was initially mandated by the CSWE (2008) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), which set comparable competences including the ability to respond to a dynamic environment and the capacity to create leadership strategies that render practice relevant in a changing world. Accordingly, social workers should respond to contexts that shape practice. Social workers are informed, resourceful, and proactive in responding to evolving organizational, community, and societal contexts at all levels of practice. Social workers recognize that the context of practice is dynamic, and use knowledge and skill to respond proactively. Social workers: continuously discover, appraise, and attend to changing local populations, scientific and technological developments, and emerging societal trends to provide relevant services; and provide leadership in promoting sustainable changes in service delivery and practice to improve the quality of social services. (CSWE, 2008, para. 8)

The introduction of ICTs into curricula across the arc of social work education will require an ongoing set of choices on which specific technologies are most critical to present in the classroom, but the effort of integration additionally presents an opportunity to convey or nurture skills that will allow social workers to make creative use of technology as it evolves. Building on Chinien and Boutin (2003), Perron et al. (2010) describe the distinction between the acquisition of specific content-area knowledge and building creative technological capacity as the difference between ICT competency and ICT literacy: “While competency refers to being able to use a given technology, literacy refers to the ability to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information” (p. 8).

Competency and literacy are both necessary pedagogical goals in training social workers. Although competencies enable professionals to communicate via specific platforms, the acquisition of technological literacy is an ethical necessity, as, ideally, it equips social workers with the capacity to innovate, adapt, and scrutinize the implications of the technologies they use. The goal of technology-infused pedagogy is to foster professionals who can critically assess ICT tools and strategies and match the necessary tool to the task, just as workers in the field are charged with matching evidenced-based practice to a diagnosis or a population based on training that models the questions, criteria, and possible consequences of electing an intervention. Technological literacy
additionally functions to preclude a scenario in which ICTs essentially automate the activities of social work “by restricting practitioners to data input and standardizing its analysis” (Sapey, 1995, p. 805), providing individuals with the skills to assess context, identify issues, and innovate to solve problems (NTEN, 2012). Although competency allows a practitioner to make use of a specific technology, literacy ensures the ability to interrogate its congruence with ethical practice.

**Diverse areas of practice: Coordinating to serve clients and to enrich knowledge**

According to Flexner (1915), one reason social work could not be considered a profession was its scope.

[Social work] appears not so much a definite field as an aspect of work in many fields... . Recur for a moment to the scope of interest indicated in the extract above quoted from the prospectus of the New York School: the improvement of living and working conditions in the community, the relief or prevention of distress whether individual or social in origin. The field of employment is indeed so vast that delimitation is impossible. (p. 24)

According to Flexner (1915), such breadth of practice settings precluded the definition or enforcement of a unified or unifying practice standard in social work. A century later, the milieu of social work remains robustly diverse. Technology has the potential to enable this diversity to become a tool of benefit allowing dialogue among social workers, between agencies, and across practice areas, an important function in a professional context that is increasingly interdisciplinary. ICTs simplify the ethical obligations of the social worker who practices at the nexus of disciplines, who, per the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008), must be able to summon and synthesize “the perspectives, values, and experiences of the social work profession” to inform choice and decision making (NASW, 2008). Technology can reduce the routine siloing of knowledge and expertise into discrete specialties, engendering communication at many levels within the “field of employment” Flexner describes as so limitless “vast” (Flexner, 1915, p. 17).

Throughout the knowledge universe, multidisciplinary paradigms are understood as engines of productivity and best practice, and technology has the potential to fuel such engagement for social work. Although professional associations have long served a convening function for the field, technology turns up the volume, accelerating communication between professionals by making journal content available online, hosting electronic mailing lists where a question can be asked and answered by affinity group members in seconds, and offering potential for distance learning in the forms of proprietary and open courses. As social workers increasingly accept the online space as a venue for productive dialogue across the profession, people in distinct areas of a specialty will be more easily able to share research outcomes and best practices. Expertise in social capital could inform end-of-life care, gamification experts might coach school social workers, and child protective workers might collaborate to keep their charges out of the juvenile justice system. Such mutual enrichment adds to the knowledge base of the profession, reducing isolation and connecting individuals to meaningful networks of learning (Hill & Shaw, 2011).

Social workers practice in environments that range from schools to hospitals, psychiatric clinics, justice settings, and multipurpose human service organizations to provide a diversity of resources (Bronstein, 2003). This multiplicity of channels sometimes fails to yield assistance that is maximized by coordination. The advent of digitization, and the associated benefits of accountability and transparency, works to alter the client experience, connecting fragmented service deliveries to a unified plan of care that anticipates needs (medication, mental health care, or job training), can offer real-time information about the availability of resources, and allows online portals to connect across multiple providers (Kairala, 2014; Perron, et al., 2010). Additionally, the saturation of service provision by ICTs allows amassing ever more diverse sets of data, gathered across heterogeneous settings and populations, that describe the dimensions of social problems
from homelessness to poverty to human trafficking and render calibrated intervention possible (Desouza & Smith, 2014).

**Relationships: Fostering empowerment**

Flexner (1915) famously identified social workers as cooperators and coordinators rather than as agents.

If, however, we conceive the social worker, not so much as the agent grappling with this or that situation, but rather as controlling the keyboard that summons, cooperates with and coordinates various professional specialists, this breadth of attainment is very far from being a matter for reproach. (p. 26)

Although those in the field have long sought to challenge this dichotomy, Flexner (1915) does describe the central role of relationships for social work. The advent of technology has altered social relationships and continues to shape them, offering social work professionals the extraordinary opportunity to examine and redefine the interactive transactions that characterize their practice.

Across multiple social work contexts, technology redefines relationships. This change resonates across micro, mezzo, and macro contexts. Evolving technologies offer the ability to create new connections to communities previously understood as either socially or practically difficult to reach, including geographically remote populations, people with disabilities, the homeless, and adolescents, among many others (Csiernik, Furze, Dromgoole, & Rishchynski, 2006; Dunlop & Holosko, 2013). The online space offers new possibilities for community organized by self-identification, collective imperative, or shared condition. At the level of the individual, ICT can rewrite the willingness to relate as its use yields greater self-disclosure, enhances the capacity to develop relationships, improves accountability, and increases participation (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004).

Technology is already challenging how power is distributed in the relationships that constitute social work, suggesting that a technology-enabled iteration of practice offers an opportunity to move closer to a socially just ideal of interactions between mutually empowered constituents (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008, p. 1486). Kairala (2014) points out that in therapy and in social work generally, the “client process includes constant evaluation, and the technology enables this to be interactive” (p. 66). Inside this more interactive situation, “ICT offers potential for service users to prioritize the issues that they may wish to work on” (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008, p. 1487), to drive reflection on past sessions based on shared notes or case records and to work toward goals defined mutually with a provider (Mishna et al., 2014; Perron, et al., 2010). The traditional therapeutic model, in which change is achieved through a relationship with another individual empowered by a professional credential, is being augmented by a model of individual ownership of wellness. Simultaneously, in arenas beyond the therapeutic, technology removes the gatekeeper from processes that support individual ownership of well-being, enabling unmediated access to new mechanisms of health, from membership in online communities of support; to websites allowing individuals to reflect on and direct their progression through serious illness; to apps that allow monitoring of mood, medication, and behaviors; to wearables that offer a digitized rendition of biological indicators.

Technology, as it is incorporated in more sophisticated ways, has the potential to change how clients relate to social work by modifying their experience and rewriting their interface with its services. In this case *access* is shorthand for empowerment, speeding the delivery of benefits, prescription refills, or information by making services available online, making mental health services available on demand or in remote areas, or offering entry into the now obscure realm of the compiled history of one’s own record. Tregeagle and Darcy (2008) write that “ICT has the potential to … change the conditions of initiation, distribution and use of spoken and written ‘texts’ in social work practice” (p. 1481). This could significantly affect the ability of service users to be heard and to influence decision-making. Individuals can increasingly access and observe their bureaucratically encoded selves, obtaining and monitoring benefits, entitlement information, and records digitally. Although this has the potential to simplify some public systems, such access also challenges existing dynamics of power within social welfare, by allowing individuals the means to
participate in evaluating their own needs and assessing change. The altered equation of responsibility could foster client agency while encouraging accountability among the professionals who typically prescribe and monitor services (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008).

**Barriers**

The goal outlined previously, to use the occasion of accelerating technological change to render social work practice more congruent with the ideals of social justice, is not simple to attain. The challenge of ICT uptake evokes the encumbrance of practical barriers that promise overwhelming logistical challenge and simultaneously conjures a perceived threat to the essence of the discipline. Ertmer (1999) classified barriers as falling into two primary categories: extrinsic (first order) and intrinsic (second order). In the larger discussion of ICT integration, extrinsic barriers include lack of resources, inadequate training, insufficient technical support, and lack of time; intrinsic barriers include instructors’ beliefs, visions concerning technology integration, and views about teaching, learning, and knowledge (p. 51–52). In the specific case of contemporary social work, extrinsic barriers include lack of faculty knowledge, swiftly changing tools, and limited resources. Intrinsic barriers include a reversal of the knowledge equation in teaching and the fact that technology itself is perceived as antithetical to the relational essence of social work.

**The intraprofessional digital divide**

In a study of tech uptake in teacher training, Goktas, Yildirim, and Yildirim (2009) suggest that a disinterest in the project of incorporating ICTs into teaching could be the sum of “insufficient ability and knowledge in the field” (p. 198). Technology unsettles the once immutable distribution of expertise in the learning relationship in social work, a phenomenon that reflects trends in ICT use superimposed on the demographics of academia. Younger populations tend to become fluent in new technologies first, to use ICTs with greater frequency, and to incorporate technology into a greater variety of activities than do older groups (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). In a national study of schools of social work, the greatest number of full-time faculty members (38.0% of respondents) fell into the age category of 55 to 64 years, and fewer than 5% were younger than 35 years (CSWE, 2010). Simultaneously, in a highly simplified measure of technology use, a 2014 Pew Trust (Pew Research Center, 2014) study of mobile ICT use found that although 83% of 18- to 29-year-olds owned a smart phone, that number was almost 50% lower (49%) among the age group most likely to encompass full time professors of social work (50- to 64-year-olds), (Pew Research Center, 2014). These measures, taken together, offer a highly simplified illustration of how technology confronts the professoriate with a foreign idiom their students are already conversant in.

**Diverse areas of practice: Rapidly evolving tools and the challenge of comprehensiveness**

The devices, platforms, and skills that make possible the fluid incorporation of technology into human activity operate within a finite span, their utility shadowed by obsolescence. From an administrative standpoint, this renders the integration of technology into pedagogy across diverse areas of practice a task of seemingly infinite dimensions. The production of a technology-infused curriculum is an ongoing institutional commitment to convey the expert use of tools that continuously evolve. This perpetual contract to “respond to changes in the computing environment that cannot be predicted in advance” (Beaulaurier, 2005, p. 157) will collide in perpetuity with the extrinsic barrier of limited resources. Thus, creating a social work curriculum that accurately and immediately reflects the evolving contemporary uses of technology across culture requires the invention of what Beaulaurier identifies as a strategy “that incorporates change as a constant” (p. 157).
The diverse areas of practice identified a century ago by Flexner (1915) make it difficult to conceptualize a set of technology competencies that could prepare a student to work efficiently on behalf of clients in all sectors. Ramping up to the iteration and teaching of relevant ICT skills may be slowed by an obvious and accelerating excess of possibility, which precludes the possibility of realizing comprehensive instruction. The number and variety of practice areas, multiplied exponentially by available technologies, create a limitless universe of potential subject areas. Would an effective technology curriculum address the ethical use of ICTs in therapy? Data interpretation and management? How technology use overlaps with poverty and the effects of the digital divide? How to write an app, and the effects of technology on family dynamics? The potentials of virtual reality and implications of telehealth? The educational guidelines produced by professional associations do not advocate for essential curricular content, define specific skills as teaching outcomes, or specify any mechanism to define an ideal of curricular scope. Beaulaurier (2005) suggests that educators need to refine and deploy an analytic model to extract an actionable map from the landscape of technological possibility. Gambrill (2014) insists that the first principal of social work education should be tangible competencies clearly correlated with client benefit, suggesting a baseline for such analytic modeling, which is one way to approach a discussion of which technological capacities matter most.

**Relationships: Threatening the essence of social work**

Many of the barriers to incorporating ICTs across education and practice (including those discussed earlier) can be understood as a confrontation between finite resources—technology-specific knowledge, human and fiscal capital—and the inevitability of unbounded technological change. Yet the most persistent forces slowing adoption may fall outside the broad category of logistical anxiety and how questions, and may reside, instead, in the deeply held beliefs that animate the discipline. One such primal tenet, refined since the inception of the discipline, is that technology is antithetical to the relational essence of social work. In her seminal textbook, *Social Diagnosis*, Mary Richmond (1917) describes this phenomenon of resistance, offering a remarkable set of parallels to the contemporary discussion of ICT uptake in her discussion of the use of her era’s fast-spreading communication technology, the telephone, in casework. In a chapter on forms of communication, she notes that the telephone’s most salient qualification for incorporation is its ubiquity. She outlines extrinsic barriers to its use, noting that practitioners have to use caution and take note of potential practical failures and impediments. Yet, ultimately, Richmond anticipates the contemporary antipathy to the use of technology in relational terms, asking whether interpersonal communication, mediated by technology, is as real, and therefore as vital a conductive medium for change, as interaction transacted in person (Richmond, 1917).

The NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics* insists that “social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships” (para. 23). Given the infiltration of ICTs into all forms of human communication, and the fact that “increasing numbers of people are engaged in relationships that are mediated by some form of ICT” (Perron et al., 2010, p. 5), those in the field face an ethical imperative to apprehend the use, meaning, and impact of such technologies on every kind of relationship.

Coming from many quarters of social work, the response to the contemporary imperative to introduce ICTs into the relations that constitute social work has been extreme, a declaration that the purposeful incorporation of technology into practice will extinguish the animating relational soul of the discipline.

Social work is the art of the self. Social work is what we bring to, whatever we have, our ability, our skill. It is through the relationship, that invisible thing that happens between two people, that change happens—we could lose that with technology. (Csiernik, Furze, Dromgoile & Rishchynski, 2006, p. 10)
Research shows that technology use does not lessen the value of social or clinical relationships (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004; Tidwell & Walther, 2002), although the dynamics of interchange may be altered (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). Yet the belief that ICTs threaten “the positive, change-developing and life-enhancing aspects of the relationship between worker and client” (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008, p. 1489) persists, fostering a resistance to change that informs professional culture and pedagogy. This fear informs a parallel critique, that the pure mechanical capabilities of technology will erode the moral purpose of social work by overwriting the relational obligation that animates aid, ultimately reducing the knowledge role of workers and automating agencies into an inhuman bureaucratic apparatus. Sapey (1995) predicts a technologically enabled universe of social services: “While the rules and regulations of agencies will increase, adding controlling bureaucratic features, their flexibility and responsiveness to individuals in need will decrease,” a transformation that serves “political agenda in which effectiveness is subordinated to economy” (p. 809). The near-exclusive focus on in-person relationships in the training of social workers renders curricula out of date and fails to prepare learners to negotiate the demands of practice practically or ethically (Perron et al., 2010).

**Conclusion: The technology integration project**

One hundred years ago, Abraham Flexner (1915) was invited to assess the emerging discipline of social work in an effort by the coordinators of the 42nd Annual Session of the National Conference of Charities and Correction to generate a strategy for attaining professional legitimacy. For the ensuing century his exclusion of social work from the roster of full-fledged professions informed the development of the field’s institutions, knowledge base, and approach to education and, at the same time, “hampered rather than facilitate[d] the social mission of the profession” (Popple, 1985, p. 574). Even so, Flexner was prescient: “The definition that we may formulate to-day will therefore need recasting from time to time, and internal modifications will occur in many of the activities that we shall mention” (p. 4). Nowhere is this clearer than with respect to technology, which currently permeates every daily human routine and relationship and thus alters the person-environment intersection that is the focus of social work, requiring the active construction of a new professional identity. Matela and Pohjola (2014) articulate the scope of the imperative:

> Developing and integrating new services always alters the nature of professional work, its mind-sets, forms of interaction, language and relationship to its clients. The scope of social work has to be rebuilt from a new foundation. The dual competence of social work and information technology results in the need to construct a new professional identity. (Matela & Pohjola, 2014, p. 7)

However, the core of this restructured professional identity does not lie in technological competency (e.g., systems and applications mastery) but in technological literacy, which enables social workers to harness tools on behalf of clients and communities as well as to analyze and critique technology’s disruption of the interface between the individual and the environment.

Technological systems, applications, and tools evolve perpetually, so successful ICT integration has to focus on the nature of the relationships that technology makes possible, searching innovation that engenders empowerment. Research in this area is in its infancy, but an outline of best practices is emerging from the dialogue on just practice in a technology-enabled incarnation of social work. To use rather than be used by technology, social work practitioners must be able to:

- Start from the relationships that technology could engender between mutually empowered constituents (Hill & Shaw, 2011; Kvasny, 2006), using those parameters to design new tools and practices;
- Evaluate technology as more than a tool to speed the existing workflow (NTEN, 2012) and look to deploy it beyond the functions of management and monitoring (Parrott & Madoc-Jones, 2008);
• Identify the full set of stakeholders in the process, taking a survey on how they use technology, their level of comfort with the integration of technology into social work, and their hopes for what a technology-enabled practice might look like (Hill & Shaw, 2011; Kairala, 2014; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008), which means including the experience of clients and frontline workers in the development of a technology strategy and the design of systems (Munro, 2005; Hill & Shaw, 2011);

• Assess the requirements of agencies and employers (Beaulaurier, 2005) to use technology in ways that support valued relationships and just processes, and the capacity of training programs to convey the literacy skills that will allow professionals to innovate to meet these needs (Perron, et al., 2010);

• Understand the integration of technology as a dynamic process, not a one-time forecast, expenditure, or training process. (Beaulaurier, 2005); and

• Recognize that the integration of technology will challenge social workers to reformulate and reanalyze fundamental ethical issues connected to power, privacy, and transparency (Hill & Shaw, 2011; Mishna et al., 2014; Perron, et al., 2010).

Disruptive as it is, technology presents an opportunity to take up Flexner’s (1915) broad challenges to the field of social work and to answer them in vigorous, engaged ways that empower individuals and communities, much as Flexner’s contemporary, Mary Richmond (1917), urged a century ago.

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References


