

# International Collaborative Learning Using Social Media to Learn About Social Work Ethics and Social Media

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**International Collaborative Learning Using Social Media to Learn About Social Work  
Ethics and Social Media**

**Social Work Education: The International Journal**

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## **Abstract**

The widespread adoption of social media (SM) has created new ethical challenges for social workers in understanding the use of SM and professional practice. This paper describes a project where social work students participated in international collaborative blended learning using closed Facebook groups to explore ethical issues related to professional practice and SM. The learning design incorporated the use of an innovative smart phone app, an online video case scenario, and asynchronous collaborative learning. The results of students' evaluations, lessons learned and recommendations about the learning design are included in the discussion.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Social Work Education, Blended Learning, International Collaborative Learning, Community of Inquiry.

## **Introduction**

The emergence and growing availability of social media (SM) including Facebook (FB), Twitter and other platforms has created new and complicated potential ethical challenges for social workers as well as potential opportunities for developing communities of practice (Reamer, 2011). Key ethical issues and challenges for social workers when engaging in an online community of practice include maintaining a professional identity in SM environments, client–worker confidentiality, and professional boundaries. Social work professional associations and regulatory bodies have recently begun to expand their codes of ethics to incorporate policies and practice guidelines related to SM. For example, in Canada the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 2013) has introduced supplemental SM practice guidelines that are linked to the *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005); the Canadian Association for Social Work Education has revised their accreditation standards to require that social work education programmes establish SM policies (CASWE, 2013); and, the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) recently updated their Standards of Practice by incorporating standards related to technology use and SM (ACSW, 2013). The United Kingdom has been a leader in developing

guidelines for the use of SM by social workers. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) developed a SM Policy for social workers in response to a recognized need to provide enhanced guidance (BASW, 2012). The BASW Policy also aims to incorporate a balance between recognizing the ethical responsibilities of social workers while recognizing the potential benefits for SM use in social work practice.

As a way of integrating learning about professional practice, Cooner (2013b, 2014) developed two learning modules for on campus students using SM as learning environment. Based on the experience of offering these modules, and in response to the need for expanded learning resources, Cooner (2013a) developed a SM and Social Work Ethics smart phone app (SMSW app). The app provides a fictitious agency scenario involving multiple ethical and practice dilemmas for learners to work through and learn from. The development of the SMSW app, and students' responses to learning about SM using the app, are reported in a recent paper by Cooner, Knowles, and Stout (2015). A teaching award of £5000 was used to create and publish the Social Work SM app. This paper reports on a project using the SMSW app as part of an international collaborative learning design aimed at helping students from Canada and England engage in an international community of practice. The paper includes a discussion of the online learning activities, the students' evaluation and feedback about their learning, a summary of lessons learned, and recommendations to other educators regarding the potential for international collaborative learning using SM in social work education.

## **Literature Review**

The widespread adoption of SM has created both benefits and presented new ethical challenges for social workers. There is limited research on the potential to develop international communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) using SM using novel ways of teaching and learning. This includes the need for expanded knowledge and guidance for understanding the ethical implications of using SM for social workers and in social work education (Duncan-Daston,

Hunter-Sloan & Fullmer, 2013; Judd & Johnston, 2012; Reamer, 2009; Reamer, 2011; Reamer, 2013). Anderson and Guyton (2013), in a study exploring psychologists, social workers, and physicians use of social networking, found that the majority of respondents used SM frequently. They also found that 60 percent of the respondents agreed that they would like ethical guidance regarding the use of technology when social networking. While recognizing the potential benefits of SM, Fang, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert and Bogo (2014) identify several important challenges of SM for social work students and educators. These include the need for students to understand security and privacy issues, the separation of private and professional lives and identity in online environments, and potential ethical breaches including those related to boundary violations and confidentiality when engaging in a community of practice. Recommendations made by Fang et al. include the need for social work education programs to develop policies addressing SM use and the need to purposefully embed knowledge and critical thinking about the use of SM into the curriculum. In this regard, they note “the explicit as well as implicit curriculum in social work education should reflect such trends [SM] and support educators and students in navigating and managing the new technological world” (p. 808). Judd and Johnston (2012) drawing on the literature from medical education suggest that social work programs design courses and learning activities that use SM to help students learn about their professional identity in online environments and ethical issues related to SM and social work.

There is limited research on the potential use of SM to develop international communities of practice (Wenger, [1998](#)) in social work education. However, there are some examples in the literature of social work educators using social media and international learning in social work education. For example, Reutenback and Black-Hughes (2012) report on an international project involving students in Minnesota and South Africa that utilized a number of learning technologies, including Facebook, to facilitate connectivity and learning between students. Kilpeläinen, Pääkkönen and Sankala (2011) evaluated the use of social media in a

social work theory and practice course offered in a blended online format. Students participated in online group collaborative group learning using Wiki's. The goals of the project were to integrate online blended and collaborative distance learning to an existing course and enhance students' familiarity with technology and the potential it presents to develop communities of practice. The authors report a number of positive learning outcomes related to knowledge development, skills, social support, and emotional dimensions of blended learning.

### **Description of Project**

In this project, social work students in the UK (N=52), Canada (N=28) participated in an online blended learning module entitled "Professionalism: Social Media and Social Work Ethics (PSMSWE). The goals of the project included:

- provide an opportunity for students to learn with colleagues from another country about an important emerging issue for social workers, and about how social workers in different countries are adapting their practice to incorporate social media
- to promote and provide students with the opportunity to learn and connect with international colleagues in a community of inquiry
- to evaluate the use of the SWSM smart phone app and the international collaborative blended learning design in assisting students to learn about social media and social work ethics
- exploring and evaluating the potential of using a social media platform like FB to create a community of practice and learning for social work students

Cooner's (2014) earlier iteration using SM in a single on-campus course was redesigned, enhanced, and expanded to incorporate the use of two additional elements to the instructional design - the SMSW app, and international collaborative learning using closed Facebook groups as an asynchronous learning environment. The UK students were enrolled in

a Social Work Skills, Values, and Approaches Course (year 1) while the CA students were enrolled in a Social Work Practice Methods course (year 2). The PSWSME module was integrated into each of the two courses. The Canadian course was already offered in a blended online format consisting of 50 percent face to face and 50 percent online learning. An existing online module on ethics and practice standards was replaced with the international collaborative PSWSME module. A similar adjustment was made in the UK course.

The implementation of this design incorporated several key features. These included:

- the ability to develop, repurpose, and utilize learning modules across different courses in international programs
- use of the SMSW app (smart phones and tablets)
- an online fictitious video case scenario utilized to depict a female youth who was being harassed on social media by an older male. The video “Consequences” was developed by The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre “Think You Know Series” and can be accessed at [http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/14\\_plus/Films/Consequences/](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/14_plus/Films/Consequences/) or on YouTube.
- a print based workbook that included a description of the learning activities, resources, assigned group tasks, and instructions on how to access assigned closed FB groups.
- the use of time-limited closed FB groups to facilitate collaborative international learning using ten mixed groups of students (7-10 students in each group)
- co-facilitation of the students’ learning by each instructor moderating and facilitating 5 mixed groups. There was also a main group where students could post general questions and comments.
- an instructional design that incorporated constructivist, collaborative, inquiry-based, and community of inquiry approaches to online learning.

The module ran from the first week in October to November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Both groups of students were introduced to the details about the learning design in face-to-face class meetings at the beginning of their courses and at the start of the module. Students were invited to participate in the learning activity and project in the first week of course(s). Given that this project was a novel learning activity involving communicating in closed FB groups and was part of a research project, ethics approval was obtained from the respective institutions and participation was voluntary. Students were very interested in the topic, and the opportunity to learn with international colleagues, even though participation added to a heavy workload.

The learning activities and tasks included two group learning products. The first was to create a PowerPoint presentation outlining draft learning outcomes and content for a fictitious agency staff development session about social media and social work ethics. The presentation was based on the students' learning from the SMSW app, reflection on the issues generated by the fictitious case scenario, assigned reading, and research on SM and social work ethics. The second task was to post a summary of their group's rationale for their choices and proposed approach for the staff development session as they related to the BASW (2012) Social Media and Social Work Ethics Policy Statement and their respective professional codes and practice standards (UK and Canada). At the end of the module, all students posted a reflection to their closed groups and their respective instructors. The UK students also presented their work to classmates in a follow up seminar; the Canadian students presented their work online.

In order to enhance privacy and isolate participation in the learning activities from general FB communications, the instructors followed a similar protocol to the one developed by Cooner (2013b). Students were provided with instructions on how to join their assigned closed FB groups. Students who did not have a FB account were asked to create one for the duration of the module, and familiarize themselves with the privacy settings. They were not required to 'friend' their colleagues or instructor. Students were also advised they could create aliases for



use in groups. Once all students and groups were enrolled in their closed groups, the status of the group was changed to 'secret' – visible only to members of the group and the instructors. All discussions and the groups were deleted following the completion of the module. Students who did not want to participate in the international collaborative component using social media, were able to complete an individual assignment on social media and social work ethics. All of the UK students participated in the module and all but four of thirty-two Canadian students chose to participate.

### **Planning, Implementation and Instructional Design Collaboration**

Key implementation aspects that are important to highlight are the time and planning involved in developing and integrating the learning activities into the UK and Canadian courses. Initial discussions began in July, 2013, when the instructors explored the concept of having students participate in international collaborative learning. Focused planning and instructional design collaboration then took place throughout August 2013 in preparation for start of classes the first week of September. The instructors used a combination of email, LinkedIn, and Google Docs to communicate and collaborate on the development and editing of the instructional design, implementation time lines, design of the pre and post learning activity questionnaire, and submission of the project to institutional ethics review boards. From the authors' perspective, this short timeline was manageable; however, both instructors had substantial experience in instructional design and teaching and learning in online environments. Faculty members with less experience in teaching online would likely need additional lead time in planning similar international learning opportunities.

### **Evaluation and Results**

The participants in this project were undergraduate students in social work in the UK and Canada (CA). The age ranges of students across programs was very similar. 50% of the

Canadian Students (CA) (N=28), 56 % of the UK students (N=50) and 56 % were between the ages of 19-24. Students aged 25-35 represented the next largest group: 35 % were between 25-35 (CA); 22 % (UK). The remainder of the students' ages were distributed evenly between 36-50 years. The majority of students in all three programs were female: (CA) 96%; (UK) 90 %. Almost all students either owned or had access to a smart phone or tablet in order to download the SWSM app and participate in the closed FB groups. Smart phone or tablet ownership was as follows: (CA) 96 % (N=23); (UK) 94% (N=51). When asked about smart phone / mobile use, the majority of the CA students (N=24) and UK students (N=45) who responded to this question in the post-learning activity questionnaire indicated that they did not have problems downloading the SWSM app and used it outside of class. In keeping with the flexible advantages of blended online learning, students also accessed their closed FB groups and worked on their learning activities and collaboration on their own schedules.

Students were invited to complete questionnaires about their learning at the beginning and end of the module. The pre and post learning activity questionnaires included questions and statements that asked about the students' confidence level and understanding of ethical issues and professionalism related to the use of SM in social work practice. The post learning activity questionnaires included additional questions exploring students' perceptions of international collaborative learning, the instructional design of the learning activities, the use of a fictitious case scenario, and their experience in using closed FB groups as a learning environment. The responses to the pre and post questions related to the SMSW app are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Knowledge of Social Media and Social Work Ethics.** [insert approximately here]

The responses to the post learning activity questionnaire are summarized in Table 2. Using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), students were asked to respond to questions exploring their experience related to the learning design of the module, international collaborative learning, the use of a fictitious case scenario, using FB as a

learning environment and learning about SM and social work ethics. Most students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed having the opportunity to learn with international colleagues, that the fictitious case scenario was helpful in providing context to their learning (real world application) and the development of their presentations. They also agreed that using FB with other learners helped them critically assess issues related to professionalism and the role social media can play in future practice and professional development. Students indicated that using FB to learn with other students also made them review their privacy settings; the UK students (M=4.5) more so than the CA students (M=3.48). Neither group had any difficulty accessing their closed FB groups, and felt the instructors were active participants in the online discussion. One statement that was rated somewhat lower by both groups of students was the statement regarding clarity of the learning activity instructions. Overall, both groups of students would recommend this kind of learning to other social work students (UK, M=4.04; CA, M= 3.8). They also provided valuable comments and suggestions for future similar learning opportunities.

**Table 2. Evaluation of International Collaborative Learning Activities** [insert approximately here]

### **Summary of Student Comments**

The students were very positive about having the opportunity to collaborate and learn with other students in an international community of practice. Most felt that they had learned new knowledge and skills related to SM and social work ethics. They were very appreciative of the opportunity to meet and work with international colleagues, and excited to have the opportunity to be involved in something different. Students commented that they appreciated the opportunity to learn about practice and resources in another country. They also commented that group members were respectful, encouraging, supportive, and committed to working collaboratively. Several students commented that they changed their FB settings and profiles

and indicated they had developed a higher level of awareness of SM and professional identity as a result of their learning. For example, students commented:

- “It was nice being able to have an alternative view of the different countries ethics and I feel it was very beneficial” (UK)
- “I found the learning experience very enjoyable. I found the BASW [SM Policy] very useful and hope one day Canada implements the same. I enjoyed the interaction with international students” (CA)
- “This was a very good way of learning for me, I particularly enjoyed working in groups and collaboration with foreign students” (UK)
- “I recommend this type of learning wherever there is an opportunity like we had. It was a privilege and I am so happy I took advantage of it all and I enjoyed every bit of it: (CA)

While most students were very positive about their experiences, several students commented that the time difference (7 hours) between the two locations was a challenge and led to time delays and sometimes difficulty in organizing group tasks. Students also commented and made suggestions regarding clearer instructions and task assignments amongst group members. As with group projects in face-to-face environments, some groups worked more effectively than others. A few students would have preferred to learn in an alternate format. For example, students commented:

- “It is good to learn with students from another country, however, the timeline kind of made everything difficult. We cannot get together on FB at the same time to discuss. Sometimes the other group is kind of ahead of us” (CA)
- “Having to communicate through FB with others often proved to be a bit difficult and I would have preferred an alternate way” (UK)

- “At times it was a struggle to get everyone organized. If tasks were assigned at the beginning I think it would have flowed better. Overall the experience was positive and there was a good level of respect” (CA)
- “Challenging but rewarding. Hard to communicate solely via social media” (UK)

### **Student Reflections**

Students’ reflections conveyed similar themes: they appreciated and enjoyed the opportunity to participate in international collaborative learning; some found the time differences challenging in terms synchronizing discussions and planning; although a challenging learning experience, students found ways to encourage and support each other in their learning; and students felt they had benefited from the experience and enhanced their knowledge of professionalism, social media and working in an international community of practice. Examples of students’ reflections include:

"My excitement grew and I started imagining how fun and exciting to be learning and sharing knowledge, skills and comparing social work policies across the globe. Upon receiving the module instructions, I became hesitant whether to continue or not as I did not fully understand the mechanics of the process. But then, my eagerness and curiosity prevailed and took the challenge. Upon starting... things became clearer and became more interesting as students from both universities were very much open, interactive and helpful. During the discussion of how we should approach and proceed with the tasks, all participants were very cooperative, helpful and interactive and thus making is easier to put the work together. Different ideas surge and I am quite amazed at how creative and knowledgeable our group was. I am impressed at how respectful, non-judgemental and receptive members are"

"It was overwhelming at first, thought of the whole assignment, and not being a frequent Facebook user, almost made me give up (thank God I didn't), as [I] later realized it was the most interesting one I have done so far. . . Finally, I say a big thank you to our lecturers from both universities . . . this was a good one."

"I kept reading over the assignment trying to make sense of what it was asking. Finally, I just hit "join group", and I was on my way to meeting individuals from the U.K. I did not feel overwhelmed because it was evident that everyone here was just as busy and we were all working towards the same goal, SOCIAL WORK!"

Students also provided constructive recommendations on how to improve the module. These included adding more clarity in the instructions related to group tasks and having students at both sites meet in face-to-face sub-groups to work on tasks and then connect and collaborate online. In this regard, some group members felt out of sync. Another suggestion was to consider increasing the overall time frame for the learning activities to compensate for time differences. Both of these recommendations could be easily incorporated and anticipated in the design of future projects. Some students commented that the discussion format in FB groups was awkward and hard to follow and navigate compared to the learning management systems used at their universities. Although not identified by the students, a related design recommendation of the authors would be to enhance the balance of students in groups. The mixed groups consisted of approximately seven to nine students each; approximately five to six UK students and two to four CA students depending on the group. This was partly a result of differences in overall class sizes and partly due to attrition and adjustments in group membership as students decided to participate in the project. However, even without these adjustments, many students commented on how both groups of students worked hard to connect, engage with one another and encourage mutual contribution to the group tasks. They also commented that group members were committed to working collaboratively and enjoyed

co-constructing their presentations.

## **Discussion**

As indicated in the responses, comments, and reflections, the students' experience overall was very positive. Although students' responses were positive, it is important to note that the results are based on self-report questionnaires and student reflections in one discrete learning module. The project provided the opportunity for the authors to draw from multiple approaches to blended learning that integrated inquiry-based, constructivist and collaborative learning into the design of the learning activities. It also involved the opportunity for students to learn about practice in another country, assemble and integrate web and other learning resources, and encouraged creative approaches in developing learning outputs. The time, effort and quality of the online student presentations was impressive, especially given the relatively short time lines the groups had to work on the module and the modest weighting assigned to the activity.

Students integrated creative and relevant content, arguments, explanations, graphics, video resources, and additional research beyond the required reading in their presentations. In this regard, the design of the module produced high pedagogical leverage based on the learning design. Another unique feature was the use of social media as an environment to explore and learn about social media. Students indicated that through participation in the module they gained greater understanding about professionalism in online environments, greater understanding of ethical challenges related to the use of social media and explored some of the strengths and weaknesses of working in an international community of practice.

The evaluation results of the project are encouraging and suggests that other educators could develop similar projects. The project also provided excellent opportunities for international instructor collaboration. These included: the opportunity to participate in creative and co-constructed instructional design; sharing design ideas and approaches to online learning; participating in a project that was innovative and addressed a current topic of interest;

expanding international learning opportunities for students; and evaluating the feasibility of using SM as a potential post-qualifying learning environment.

## **Conclusion**

In this project the authors designed and co-taught an international collaborative learning activity for social work students to enable learning about social media, social work ethics and experiences of engaging in an international community of practice. The learning design incorporated a smart phone app, online video case scenario, and asynchronous online collaborative group work. Using closed time-limited Facebook groups as a learning environment was feasible and provided the students with first hand exposure of participating in an international community of practice whilst using a SM platform. Although the students' evaluations were very positive, the project also provided important lessons that can be applied to future projects. These include building additional time into the planning of the learning design and for developing learning activities. Although the authors were able to design, develop, and integrate the learning activities in a short period of time, faculty with less experience in teaching online would likely need additional time for planning and implementation. In terms of the learning activities, we would recommend considering extending the time frame by an additional one or two weeks to compensate for time zone differences. Two other recommendations are to provide additional clarity regarding group processes and, where possible, balance the numbers of students in groups (although it is important to note, students who were more self-directed were able to negotiate group structures and planning process without further direction; as they would in a face to face environment). A further adjustment in the design of the CA blended course would be to adjust the overall number of online group projects in the course to accommodate the addition of international collaborative group work. The authors would encourage other social work educators to consider integrating international collaborative learning activities in their courses.



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**Table 1. Knowledge of Social Media and Social Work Ethics**

Question	Country	Pre-app mean	Post-app mean
1. can you outline how social work values and ethics should govern your behaviour when using social media sites?	Canada UK	3.3 (n=23) 3.2 (n=32)*	3.96 (n=27) 4.2 (n=32)
2. How confident are you that you can use social media appropriately for continuing professional development?	Canada UK	3.07 3.6	4.4 4.5
3. How confident are you that you can advise social work colleagues about what is and is not appropriate to say or post online?	Canada UK	3.65 3.78	4.28 4.4
4. How confident are you that you can explain to social work colleagues the boundary issues involved in using social media with service users?	Canada UK	3.43 3.75	4 4.3
5. How confident are you that you can outline how social media could be used to gain service user input to improve social work services?	Canada UK	3.08 3	4.12 4
6. are you able to identify relevant sections of your Social Work code of Ethics/Standards of Practice or other related professional	Canada UK	2.9 2.4	3.84 4

policies that might be helpful in evaluating ethical dilemmas related to social media and social work practice?			
7. How confident are you that you could provide information to service users that would help them remain safer online and in using social media?	Canada UK	3.2 3.5	4 4.5

\*only matched responses for the UK students were included.

**Table 2. Evaluation of International Collaborative Learning Activities**

Question Canada n=27 UK n=45	Country	Post-learning activity mean
1. I found the Social Media app was a useful tool in helping me think and learn about social media and social work ethics	Canada UK	3.9 4.32
2. I found that the fictitious Jade and Justin video case example helped set the context for the discussion and development of the staff development outline (Task 1)	Canada UK	3.88 4.32
3. I enjoyed having the opportunity to learn collaboratively with international colleagues studying social work	Canada UK	4.16 4.07
4. The instructions for the learning activities were clear	Canada UK	3.59 3.8
5. I did not have difficulty joining my closed FB group, or the core closed group	Canada UK	4.41 4.7

6. The instructors were active participants in the online discussion and available to respond to questions	Canada UK	4.6 4.6
7. Using Facebook to engage in learning activities with other students made me review my privacy settings	Canada UK	3.48 4.5
8. Using Facebook to engage with other learners has made me critically assess the role social media can play in developing my future social work skills and knowledge	Canada UK	4.2 4.5
9. Using Facebook to engage with other learners has made me critically assess the personal and professional boundary issues of using social media for continuing professional development	Canada UK	4.25 4.5
10. Using Facebook to engage with other learners has made me less confident about using social media based social work communities to develop my future social work skills and knowledge	Canada UK	1.8 1.8
11. I would recommend this kind of learning format (use of apps, shared multimedia resources and collaborative online learning) to other social work students	Canada UK	3.8 4.04