

Creating Social Work Virtual Learning Communities in Africa

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Introduction

Even though traditional social work training will continue to occupy a prominent role in training social workers on the African continent, the traditional educational model is inadequate in addressing educational challenges of the twenty-first century. Due to this, there is a need to begin exploring the power of on-line technologies to provide continuing educational opportunities for African social work professionals and students.

Distance education is timely and relevant for Africa, given the need for access to formal education, coupled with the limited resources encountered by African educators and students. The concept of distance education is beginning to receive increased attention by various Ministries of Education on the African continent. This new educational model will enable schools of social work to increase enrollment levels, gain access to up-to-date educational materials through on-line libraries, provide virtual access to the best instructors at a distance, share resources, become part of the new global learning community, and provide a forum for African scholars and educators to address the world community through their writings and research in a way that has never been done before.

Today, a vast number of social work professionals and educators in Africa need access to continuing and advanced social work education and training. African social work professionals need a kind of social work training that would make them more responsive to the challenges confronting the African continent. Once social work schools in Africa have the resources for their own expanded tertiary social work programs, and the necessary faculty to support these programs, it will accelerate the development of the profession, if social work professionals and students, looking for access to higher education, could take advantage of on-line

resources from academic institutions offering social work professional development and education worldwide, via distance education. There are academic institutions in the United States and elsewhere that offer at-a-distance courses, continuing education, and complete social work degree programs. Students anywhere in the world who have the Internet and a web connection can enroll in these programs. In theory, African social work professionals and students can enroll in these programs immediately, and be trained along with U.S. social work professionals and others on-line.

The 27 social work schools and social work professional training institutes in Africa could create an on-line consortium to provide professional development and continuing education to African social work professionals and students. The mixture of social work professionals and students from Africa, the U.S., and other parts of the world in an on-line environment will enrich cross-cultural professional development and continuing social work education by providing an intercultural dimension.

This paper explores the technological opportunities and challenges facing social work education in Africa. It examines how the creation of social work virtual learning communities could help enhance professional social work development and continuing education, and increase the number of trained social workers on the continent.

Evolution of Social Work and Continuing Education in Africa

The evolution and development of social work in Africa has been influenced by foreign traditions and models. In order to understand social work education across various African regions, one must understand the colonial legacy and the impact it has had on indigenous institutions. Because the colonialists were interested in training people to serve

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or support the colonial administration, the nature of the training strongly reflected social work training in the metropolitan country (Asamoah, 1997).

Social work education was introduced in Africa at different times in the early years of the twentieth century. It is worth noting that in a continent with 52 countries, only about ten countries have established schools of social work. To date, the three East African countries (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda), one North African country (Egypt), four Southern African countries (Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, and Zimbabwe), one West African country (Ghana), and one country in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia) have social work programs. South Africa has the highest number of social work schools in Africa (21 schools of social work).

The early schools of social work were introduced in Egypt in 1937 and South Africa in 1942. Historically, social work education was designed to prepare social workers for specific generic assignments within the foreign political administrations of the time, though most of the schools established in the 1970s in East and West Africa reflected a different focus and approach. The curricula focused on social development, social analysis, policy making, research, and multidisciplinary and integrated approaches. In instances where post-graduate studies are offered, (e.g., Egypt, Ethiopia, Tanzania) the emphasis is on management and policy making.

There is evidence of specific exit points in some of the training programs. For instance, Tanzania offers a one-year Certificate in Social Welfare Services and a three-year Advanced Diploma in Social Work; Kenya offers a two-year Certificate of Social development and a three-year Bachelor of Arts in Social Work. The University of Natal offers a one-year Certificate in Community and Development Studies, a two-year Diploma in Community Development Studies, and a four-year Bachelor of Social Work program. It seems that the better developed the country is economically, the better positioned it is to afford diversity in curricula, degrees awarded, and geographical spread (Rao & Kendall, 1984).

While it is true that both Francophone and Anglophone African countries inherited different legacies which influenced the types of post-colonial institutions that emerged in Africa, social work education across the continent has a lack of congruence between social work practice and African cultural traditions (Asamoah, 1997). Historically, social work tended to focus on therapeutic and restorative activities, since colonial regimes paid very limited attention to the needs of the majority of the people across the continent. (Mckendrick, 1990; Mazibuko et al, 1992; Osei-Hwedie, 1995). When most African countries gained independence, there was the need for emerging social work professions to emphasize broad social development goals for the social work profession, and this has continued in the post-independence era (Hall, 1990; Midgley, 1997; Mazibuko et al, 1992). Most social work programs continue to replicate western models of social work. Others have used terms such as "indigenization," "authentization," and "domestic model of social work" to describe the need for more local content and the development of relevant social work theory (Hall, 1987, 1990; Midgley, 1983; Shawky, 1972; Walton & El Nasr, 1988). Midgley (1983) uses the term "professional imperialism" to describe this situation. According to Midgley, social work education and practice in Africa, from the time it was introduced in the early twentieth century, focused on generic social work to respond to the demands and needs as defined by the colonial regimes or other forms of dominant foreign models. He writes:

These principles cannot be applied usefully because of the nature and urgency of the problems social workers deal with. Instead they deal, as best as they can, with the crises of urban destitution and maladjustment and devote their time to responding to requests for urgent material assistance, securing residential places and dealing with judicial child committal, probation and maintenance cases. (p. 154).

Today, social work education, training, and professional development in Africa are changing. While some social work programs are increasingly incorporating local content in their curricula, continuing education and professional development is still under-emphasized. Continuing education remains on the peripherals of the profession, and is generally made up of short-term workshops and short-term, in-service training activities. The implementation of human capital development programs and continuing education has been compromised by lack of human and financial resources (Hampson, 1995; Kaseke, 1986). Information on the total number of social work professionals, students, and faculty is lacking. Most social work faculty hold joint appointments with other departments. Some schools of social work, for example those in Ghana, exist as departments within major units. All of these factors present problems in providing accurate data on social work professionals in Africa.

To overcome some of the challenges confronting the development of social work in Africa, the limited emphasis on social work professional development and continuing education, and the need for a professional social work body, the Association of Social Work Education in Africa (ASWEA) was formed in 1971 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The organization has been instrumental in spearheading social work training and research, and in arranging workshops and conferences to deliberate on such issues. Even though the activities of ASWEA have been sporadic, their emergence marked a turning point in the evolution of social work in Africa (ASWEA, 1982).

The creation of social work virtual learning communities will go a long way in addressing some of the challenges confronting the profession in Africa. Mutual scholarly and educational collaborations could be established between African schools of social work and social work schools in Asia, North America, Europe, Latin America, and

Australia. This could then lead to the formation of a global social work learning community where educational resources and training could be shared by social work institutions and professional organizations in Africa and other parts of the world.

Social Work and Emerging Information Technology

Information communication technologies (ICT) hold much promise for breaking down the traditional barriers that have limited access by African educational institutions to external resources. Social work educators in various institutions are embarking with renewed determination to incorporate distance education as a delivery mode in their educational curricula. Globally, the number of virtual on-line universities has been growing and will continue to grow over the next few years. Interactive distance learning strategies, as well as traditional instructional methodologies, could be used to facilitate and enhance pedagogical, curricular, research, and instructional development. This is because of the promise it holds for enhancing educational praxis at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Today, distance learning strategies and computer applications have made it possible to expand the content, extend the reach, and increase the effectiveness of existing social work programs in Africa and around the world. This could be achieved by forming a virtual consortium of schools of social work to improve access to social work education, training, and professional development. Such a consortium has the potential of expanding the frontiers of learning and skill development for countless numbers of social work professionals and students in Africa and other parts of the world. This approach to social work training will open up new frontiers to professional education; enrich collaborative research among African universities and between universities in Africa and other parts of the world; promote cross-national, multi-disciplinary perspectives in educational practice; and equip students, faculty and administrators, and social work

professionals with tools and resources that would enable them to successfully engage the academic world of the twenty-first century.

Today in Africa, the application of distance education technologies to social work education is very limited. Efforts to bring computer technology and to apply distance learning technologies have just begun, and there is much yet to be learned. Africa trails the rest of the world in the use of distance learning technologies in educating social workers, but distance education is beginning to receive serious attention by social work educators.

Largely due to technological imbalances, there remains formidable constraints on the advancement of on-line social work education and professional development in Africa. Telephone and other communication infrastructure beyond the cities remain inadequate. The use of technologies and services must be financially sustainable over time. This calls for innovative funding strategies to address this issue. Other problems are poor connectivity, inadequate infrastructure and human resource capacity, absence of national policies, and antiquated telephone lines (Moyo, 1996; Richardson, 1997). Africa, with about 12% of the world's population has only 2% of the global telephone network and over half of the lines are in the cities (Marcelle, 1998). According to the International Telecommunication Union, telephone density in Africa is less than 2 lines per 1,000 inhabitants, compared with 48 per 1,000 in Asia, 280 per 1,000 in America, 314 per 1,000 in Europe, and 520 per 1,000 in high income countries. Today, only 4 African countries (South Africa, Kenya, Egypt, and Tunisia) have international circuits larger than 64 kilobits. Five countries in Africa (Comoros, Congo-Brazzaville, Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia) remain without plans for full Internet access (Jensen, 1996). All these pose problems for employing on-line social work education and training in Africa.

Another major constraint is technology. In order for distance education technologies to be practical, students must have access to a computer that is

connected to an Internet Service Provider (ISP) and that can send and receive messages using a browser such as Netscape and Microsoft Explorer. Each student would also need an e-mail account, and, depending upon the course, perhaps access to a VCR and monitor to play videotaped lectures.

Clearly these needs would, at the present time, make taking such courses difficult for institutions with limited connectivity.

Financial constraints also have an impact on distance learning in Africa. Internet service on the continent is expensive, averaging U.S. \$50 per month (Jensen, 1996). To help defray this connectivity cost, as well as the costs of the basic hardware and software, multilateral agencies and institutional donors can be encouraged to provide financial support.

Fortunately, the information landscape on the continent is gradually changing. Africa is awakening to the potential of information technology to accelerate educational and socio-economic development. Thanks to the effort on the part of national governments and international donor agencies, which are working to ensure that Africa takes its rightful place in the mushrooming global information technology revolution, the information landscape on the continent is gradually changing. For example, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa/Pan African Development Information Systems (PADIS Initiative) aims to establish low-cost and self-sustained nodes to provide access to e-mail in 24 African countries (Darkwa, 1999). Other initiatives from the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) all aim to build the information infrastructure on the continent.

Another approach to overcoming the technological challenge is to explore the use of wireless technologies. Over the years, the use of wireless technologies has advanced very rapidly in Africa. In an environment with the least developed wired networks, it offers greater reliability, lower mainte-

nance costs, and better security (Jensen, 1996). For the effective use of this technology, however, skilled technicians have to be trained to install the system, and the costs of installation could be astronomical. In spite of this, wireless technology offers the best options for addressing the telecommunication needs of vast areas in Africa that do not have a well-developed telecommunications infrastructure. This technology has already been used in various countries in Africa. For example, the Internet Service Provider in Tanzania has been using wireless technology, in the form of cell phones, for all of its dial-in connections (Jensen, 1996). In South Africa, an on-going pilot project allows two rural schools (Micha-Kgasi and Prestige College) to use cell-data to connect to one another. This wireless technology holds much promise for the future datafication of rural schools (Rodda, 1997). The numerous schools and institutions in Africa without any form of connectivity could benefit from the use of this technology.

Opportunities Presented By Distance Education For Social Work Education in Africa

Distance education presents ample opportunities to enhance social work education in Africa. Due to its ability to reach non-traditional students who, because of obligations such as work, family, and distance, find it almost impossible to enroll as regular students, on-line social work education will open a new frontier to students. Using interactive distance learning strategies to facilitate and enhance pedagogical, curricular, research, and instructional development could go a long way in addressing the challenges inherent in the education and training of social workers in Africa. Through the web, it is possible to reach the broadest possible audience of learners. In this day and age, when Africa is confronted with a shortage of quality teachers and instructors, web-based courses, with their ability to combine texts, graphics, video clips, and sound bites, have the potential to extend education to students regardless of where they are physically

located.

Distance education can provide instructionally effective, highly interactive learning experiences that are flexible, equitable, and responsive to individual student's learning styles (Rogers, 1996).

Social work educators in Africa should endeavor to promote electronic connectivity as a complementary delivery system that enables students to take advantage of traditional instructional methods, as well as interactive distance learning technologies. Today, there exists the technology to provide education to countless numbers of Africans who would otherwise have none without it. Information technology allows communication with anyone, anywhere at a very rapid speed. African social work students, and their counterparts in other parts of the world, stand to benefit if social work training and education is based on the strategic use of information and communication technologies.

Features of the Proposed Model

The proposed model will use "second media age" communication technologies to make it possible for African social work students, only a fraction of whom can be accommodated in African tertiary institutions, to enroll directly, and without leaving their homes, in on-line social work schools in Africa and around the world. "The first media age" might be called "The Age of Broadcast." Books, radio, and television are "first media age" technologies: information and instruction comes from a central source to many. The British Open University and the new Africa Virtual University are examples of "first media age" distance learning ventures: instruction comes in well designed packages from England or the U.S. to African students. There is little opportunity for students to interact with each other, and little opportunity for Africans to be in the same classes as Africans from different countries and students from other parts of the world.

"The second media age" might be called "The Age of the Network." The central second media age

technologies are computers linked to others anywhere in the world via the Internet. The technology is dialogic rather than monologic: African social work students can study, debate, and collaborate with their colleagues in other parts of Africa and around the world. Furthermore, African social work students can access literally millions of educational sites on the web and can augment what they learn in class by joining any of literally thousands of discussion groups, forums, and listservs in their areas of learning. The features of the "second media age" model that distinguish it from other distance learning initiatives are: a) the pan-African emphasis; b) the global consortium; c) the emphasis on dialogism; d) the virtual campus; and e) content relevance to the needs of the continent.

The Pan-African Emphasis

The model will use the computer, the Internet, and the World Wide Web as its distance learning technologies make it possible for social work students in any African school of social work to take on-line courses together. This makes it possible for the limited social work educational resources (faculty, books, instructional material, etc.) to be shared by all the social work schools.

The Global Social Work Consortium

The consortium will begin by identifying all on-line social work schools around the world. This will facilitate the transfer of credits among members of the consortium. A mediating agency, an existing social work accrediting body (such as the Council on Social Work Education), or a new accrediting body (such as a Council on Virtual Social Work Programs in Africa), could be created and vested with overall responsibility for coordinating the activities of the consortium.

"Dialogism"

The model emphasizes the creation of social networks, networks of dialogue between African social work schools, and social work students in other parts of the world with on-line courses and programs. African social work students will take classes with a global on-line social work student

body. It is expected that the in-class and out-of-class relationships that are created will persist after the courses phase is over.

The Virtual Campus

The computer and the Internet allow for the creation of all of these aspects of a college on-line. Since creating virtual buildings on-line is relatively inexpensive, the virtual environment can have a growing group of specialized facilities to house conferences, workshops, and institutes that connect African social work students to their counterparts in other parts of the world.

Content Relevance to Social Work Practitioners and Students in Africa

One major challenge is making on-line educational content more relevant to the needs of African social work students. Much criticism has been leveled against foreign traditions and models in social work practice in Africa (Asamoah, 1997; Osei-Hwedie, 1993). Distance learning, by its very nature, involves more than just the transmission of information, but also the transmission of cultural/social paradigms between and among the participants. This transmission is a very important facet of any design of a distance learning curriculum that is sensitive to the cross-national cultural experiences (Cummins and Sayers, 1996; Spirou, 1995). Most of the distance learning models currently available have been developed and tested outside of Africa; phenomena Hassan & Ditsa (1997; 1998) call "the cultural identity of information technology." A concern is that little research is done to localize content of distance education initiatives developed in North America and other parts of the world to suit the culture, developmental needs, and African educational systems. (Cummins and Sayers, 1990; Sayers, 1991; Owston, 1997). To date, few scholars or technocrats supporting the push for information technology access for schools have examined questions regarding the possible effects information gained via technology might have on the culture, and traditions of a people

(Asante, 1992; Ani, 1994). From an African perspective, the integration of African social work values, culture, and knowledge base should be a paramount concern when introducing content on-line. Africa needs to do an inventory of what resources it has in preparation for participating in this process. This can, to some extent, reduce the need to blame the West, while enabling the continent to engage as partners who know what they can offer, what they need to bargain for, and how they should influence the social work education process globally. There is the need for information technology to become universally familiar, non-threatening, and relevant (Munasinghe, 1989) while providing innovative applications to address emerging problems in Africa. It will be an environmental disaster if the third world simply replicates the technological strategies of the West (Bhagavan, 1990).

Overall planning should include clear definitions of appropriate culture and philosophies, policies that support or inhibit social work education, content that addresses needs and problems peculiar to Africa, ongoing resources or strategies to develop the necessary infrastructure, and appropriate models of treatment and intervention. It is incumbent upon the African intellectual community to adapt the Internet to suit the purpose of providing a forum for African scholarship. In doing so, there is the need for each African country to formulate its own national information technology policy that will select the best technology for their culture and ensure that new technology does not destroy its cultural heritage.

Ankrah (1987) urges social workers in Africa to break with the colonial model of social work and suggests a dynamic, holistic social work model that takes the continent's underdevelopment into consideration. She outlines the five key dimensions of this model as: a) microdeterministic, where the needs of Africans determine social work's priorities and approach; b) social design, where social workers will design mobilization strategies through village councils; c) a change orientation, to deal with

planning and sustaining positive change at various levels; d) a futuristic orientation, to anticipate future human needs; and e) a political will dimension, to enable social workers to consciously forge political linkages with political leaders.

Funding the Virtual University Concept

Attracting funding to launch an initiative of this nature is always a challenge. The organizations within and outside Africa interested in technological applications to human problems are most likely to fund projects of this nature. Bilateral and multilateral agencies such as the Economic Commission for Africa, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Pan African Development Information Systems (PADIS), the African Information Society Initiative, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Leland Initiative, the International Telecommunication Union, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the World Bank InfoDev project have funds for projects of this nature. Another potential source of funding is the Acacia Project Initiative, an international effort led by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and their national and local partners in Africa. Also, the Education for Development and Democracy Initiative (EDDI) is designed to improve the quality of and technology for African education to assist with Africa's integration into the world community of free-market democracies. It reflects President Clinton's commitment to strengthen educational systems and democratic principles, and to fortify and extend the vital developmental partnership between America and Africa. EDDI provides funds for the development of technology-based education in Africa.

Conclusion

Distance education is beginning to receive increased attention by Ministries of Education on the African continent. This concept will enable schools of social work to increase enrollment levels, gain access to up-to-date educational materials through on-line libraries, provide virtual access to the best faculty around the world, share resources, and become part of the global learning community. The African educator has a pivotal role to play in addressing the Internet and World Wide Web's potential for providing information relevant to provide excellent education opportunities. Ways should be found to indigenize social work, to make it more relevant to the needs of the continent, and to ensure the professional development and continuing education needs of African social work professionals. The locus of responsibility to initiate and sustain a dialogue on social work education and professional development rests primarily with the social work educators and trainers in Africa. As one of the first steps, they can investigate what is available on the continent and the possibility of expanding to those countries with a strong potential. Educators and trainers could begin a process of examining accreditation and internal resource opportunities in Africa. External resources are an added advantage, which should enhance a well thought out, strategic plan and internal resources. Educators and trainers need to make a conscious effort to be technologically literate if this approach is

to be successful. As to the issue of what information and knowledge African people want to provide for themselves, that can be gleaned from the mass of mis-information and mis-education available on the Internet. It is essential that the African educational experience and worldview be given a voice through the use of distance education and educational technology.

Distance learning has the potential of meeting new educational demands because it can provide an instructionally effective, highly interactive learning experience that is flexible, equitable, and responsive to individual needs. (Rogers, 1996). Continuing education should be viewed and developed within the concepts of local demands, globalization, and information technology.

A need for more investment in human capital for social work and human services within socio-economic and holistic approaches becomes imperative.

Using virtual learning communities and other forms of information technology can be a way of addressing the prevalent lack of qualified personnel in social work programs in many countries within the continent (Asamoah, 1997). Overall, there are new populations to be served by social work, new types of social conditions and challenges requiring different levels of responsibilities and interventions. On the basis of these issues, continuing education and professional development become essential components in education and practice.

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Creating Social Work Virtual Learning Communities in Africa

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