

Technology in Social Work Education: Educators' Perspectives on the NASW Technology Standards for Social Work Education and Supervision

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Forward

In 2017, a new publication, *Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice*, was issued to address the intersections of professional social work practice and technology. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), along with the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), and the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA) cosigned the Standards, developed by a committee of primarily social work practitioners. The CSWE clarified that the Standards are neither part of the 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards competencies nor part of the accreditation process (CSWE, personal communication, June 30, 2017). The authors of the Standards also offered brief interpretations of each of the Standards and sub-standards.

Hearing a call for more thorough guidance, the editors of this document reached out to social work educators and supervisors with specialized knowledge of teaching and supervising with technology and asked them to help us think about Standard 4, Social Work Education and Supervision. In the early Fall of 2017, 23 people responded to the editors' request to contribute their best practice and research wisdom. We used technology to crowdsource (obtain input from a number of people online), which allowed us to co-create, co-edit, and gather rapid feedback on this document over the course of a month. The following pages include the original standards published by NASW, followed by interpretations developed by our full group of 26 social work academics and supervisors. It offers considerations for decision-making related to the benefits and risks of technology use in teaching and supervision, developed by those who have direct experience in these arenas.

We extend our appreciation to the contributors, and to all social work educators and supervisors who strive to see all the potentials and benefits of technology, innovate while upholding our professional values and ethics, and understand and educate about risks of technology while working with and on behalf of people who are the most vulnerable.

Thank you,

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Editors

Introduction

The latest NASW Technology Standards (2017a) offer updated guidance for thinking about the use of technology in social work practice, with brief interpretations. Standard 4.0 specifically addresses social work education and the role of educators and supervisors in maintaining professional standards related to technology-mediated practice and educational settings. Discussions with educators revealed a need for broader consideration, which is why the interpretations below were written in collaboration with 26 social work educators and supervisors, whose names are listed at the beginning of this document. The purpose of this document is to shift the interpretations from a mostly risk-averse and micro-practice focus to a perspective that also acknowledges the potential strengths of technology in micro to macro levels of practice and social work education, supervision, and continuing education.

This document is not meant to replace the NASW Technology Standards interpretations; rather it offers expanded and alternative interpretations. For instance, although the NASW Technology Standards emphasizes educators who are utilizing or currently specifically teaching about technology, the following interpretations widen this scope to address the need for ALL social work educators to have some basic understanding and competence in the use of technology and its impact on our field.

Further, we acknowledge that all educators are using technology in some way and have important roles in helping students prepare for technology-mediated practice at all levels. The word “competence” is used but not defined in the

NASW Technology standards. The CSWE considers competence to be “the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being (CSWE, 2015, p. 6).” Further, CSWE notes that professional and ethical behavior for a social worker includes using “technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes (CSWE, 2015, p. 7).” Along with being professional and ethical with technology, we see competency with technology for social work practice as context-dependent and evolving as technology evolves. Using technology in social work education requires ongoing participation in learning networks and continuing education, just as in any other practice area.

We also encourage educators to acknowledge their personal biases and competencies related to the intersections of technology and social work, and to consider how those are transmitted to students, colleagues, and other constituents. Social work educators are ideally positioned to model and support students, colleagues, and other constituents in becoming lifelong learners in these areas and others.

Finally, in order for social work educators to practice these ethical standards, educational settings need to ensure they offer the infrastructure and technical support to educators to teach effectively in the classroom and in field placements.

Standard 4.01:

Use of Technology in Social Work Education

Social workers who use technology to design and deliver education and training shall develop competence in the ethical use of the technology in a manner appropriate for the particular context.

All social work educators should develop competence in the ethical and professional use of technology; the best practices for utilizing technology in social work education and in social work practice; and be prepared to teach basic digital literacy skills to students which are needed for ethical practice and to meet the competencies required by CSWE 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (e.g., from Competency 1, Professional and Ethical Behavior, using technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes). In addition to understanding the use of technology, social work educators should help students understand the norms, values, and culture of specific applications, which together with the use of technology, inform digital literacy.

While not everyone will adopt the many different forms of technology (nor should they), social work educators should have a working knowledge of how to use technology ethically, and model those skills for their students. Social work educators should have competency in the learning management systems and other classroom technologies that they utilize. Social work educators in any setting should utilize the tools and techniques for which they have training and support, keep updated on effective pedagogical practices for using technology in education, and should bring concerns about their training and support to the appropriate administrators when it may have a significant impact on students.

Some best practices for staying informed include developing a professional learning network in the area of technology in practice, attending institutional training about technology tools and practices, participating in formal continuing education opportunities, and reviewing scholarly literature and current news related to technology in higher education and social work practice.

Some best practices for using technology in social work education include careful attention to social presence, clear expectations, scaffolding learning, facilitated conversations, the use of active learning, and use of activities that are well-linked to learning objectives.

Social work educators have an ethical responsibility to ensure that diversity and difference across types of learners are respected when implementing technological innovations in classroom settings. Social work educators should not replicate existing structural inequalities when creating digital class environments and assignments for their courses. The use of classroom technologies should consistently fit with desired learning outcomes, and support students in the use of transferable technology skills. Student technology competence or access should not be assumed, and students should have opportunities to demonstrate and receive feedback about basic technology competencies both during classroom and practicum training. A best practice is to work with institutional supports such as instructional designers, disability services, and centers for teaching and learning.

Social work educators should assure that they and their students understand the liabilities and risks associated with storing sensitive information about students, peers, and/or clients on cell phones, external drives, or other storage that may be lost, stolen, and exposed to viruses. They should take appropriate actions to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and security of student records and other sensitive information.

Finally, social work educators, both with their current employers, their professional organizations, and with larger national or regional conferences, should advocate for training on evidence-based teaching and teaching-based evidence related to technology in the classroom and in the field.

Social work administrators should support ethical technology usage in the classroom and encourage grants or other research support to help develop research studies that allow social work educators to gain a better understanding of best practices or effective technology tools to use in the social work classroom.

Standard 4.02:

Training Social Workers about the Use of Technology in Practice

Social workers who provide education to students and practitioners concerning the use of technology in social work practice shall provide them with knowledge about the ethical use of technology, including potential benefits and risks.

All social work educators should understand the benefits and risks in the ethical and professional use of technology, and prepare students with this knowledge. Ethical principles of the NASW Code of Ethics should guide decisions about when technology may cause benefit or risk (NASW, 2017b). Social work educators should help students consider the ways that technology intersects with core values and ethics of the profession such as commitment to clients, self-determination, informed consent, competence, diversity, privacy, and access to records.

When training students in technology-mediated interventions, social work educators should help students understand how to evaluate the impact of the intervention on their own clients, how to identify promising practices, evidence-based practices, and best practices regarding the use of technology, including when technology-mediated interventions are and are not appropriate.

Alongside discussions of risks related to technology use, educators should acknowledge the ways in which technology-mediated practice may be the best tool in some situations. They should educate students about the ethical risks that may be present by using and NOT using technology (i.e., the exclusion of services to certain populations, failure to reach constituents by not having information easily accessible, record-keeping deficiencies).

Social work educators should offer training in effective and ethical ways to use technology to mobilize communities, disseminate information, and reach constituents in mezzo and macro interventions. Best practices include using technology to bring qualified guest experts into the classroom, incorporating technology-mediated practice into assignments and learning experiences, discussing emerging technologies and their potential benefits and risks, demonstrating the ways that technology can be helpful in understanding client

or agency outcomes, and selecting texts and readings for courses that include information about technology in social work practice.

Standard 4.03: Continuing Education

Social work educators who use technology in their teaching and instruct students on the use of technology in social work practice shall examine and keep current with relevant emerging knowledge.

All social work educators should stay current with the best and evidenced-based practices on: A) teaching with technology, and; B) the use of technology/role of technology in the topics on which they consult, supervise and instruct students, colleagues, and other constituents.

Teaching with technology relates to instructional methods, pedagogy, and teaching/learning philosophy. Thus, all social work educators need to stay current with best practices, and when available, evidence-based approaches for using technology in educating students, colleagues, and other constituents such as field supervisors and practicing social workers. Best practices include protecting student privacy; ensuring teaching materials are accessible; and organizing and sequencing content clearly. When teaching skills, the skills should be modeled for students and students should have opportunities to practice skills in simulations. Standard 4.01 also addresses the importance of competence in technology for all educators.

Educators must have basic understanding of technology-mediated social work practice, address their personal biases related to technology-mediated practice, and stay up to date in the areas they teach that intersect with technology so they can appropriately evaluate the risks and benefits from a social work lens. Examples of topics that require specialized knowledge include federal or state laws that impact the intersection of social work and technology, such as Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) standards for health and behavioral health settings and the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) for school social workers, as well as emerging theoretical explanations and empirical findings about how technology shapes social settings, interactions, and human development (U.S. Department of Education, 2015; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017). Educators should instruct students on the importance of lifelong learning necessary to adapt to a changing landscape in fast-moving technological advancement.

Standard 4.04: Social Media Policies

When using online social media for educational purposes, social work educators shall provide students with social media policies to provide them with guidance about ethical considerations.

A social media policy, when developed and applied for professional purposes by a social worker, reflects the behaviors that the social worker aspires to when using social media for work with clients, colleagues, and communities. This offers the opportunity to provide informed consent about how the social worker uses social media, reinforces professional behavior, and gives an opportunity to address and avoid potential boundary crossings. Educators who are using social media either personally or professionally and publicly, or as part of the social work curriculum, can use the opportunity to model the relevant and transferable skill of creating their classroom social media policy. Ideal social media policies in social work education should reinforce digital literacy, reflect grounding in the core values of the profession, and be modelled in a strengths-based perspective. Both benefits and challenges of the use of social and digital media should be reflected in the policy.

When using technologies in the classroom that include public exposure (such as blogs and social media), social worker educators should provide and model informed consent, including an explanation of the risks and benefits of establishing a professional digital presence, and provide alternative forms of participation if the student declines participation in publicly accessible discussions.

Best practices for social media policies include written policies that are shared in a systematic way (i.e., on course syllabi or via student handbooks); consideration of the impact on the most vulnerable; periodic reviews of the policy; and amending the policy when a new risk or benefit is identified. The strongest social media policies will provide general guidelines that are linked to social work values, ethics, and professional behavior. Policies that are too prescriptive will fail to address every possible situation and will lose relevance quickly as the technology and applications change.

Social work educators should first be intentional in their efforts to understand ethical and professional use of social media as it relates to students, clients,

colleagues, and other constituents, and second, strive to shape healthy digital presences as they relate to the social work profession and practice. Best practices for social work educators includes modelling ethical and professional use of social media for others, providing both positive and negative examples of social media use in professional practice, and offering opportunities to practice social and digital technology in the classroom and in field placements when deemed appropriate by the agencies.

Finally, social work educators should encourage the administrative units at their institutions to develop social media policies and/or best practices that help guide students, faculty, staff, agency field supervisors, and other constituents on how to ethically and professionally use social and digital technologies in the social work profession. Best practices include consulting and engaging all constituents in the development of organizational social media policies and providing resources and supports in the development of social media policies, such as professional development training and materials on how to use social and digital media in professional ways.

Standard 4.05: Evaluation

When evaluating students on their use of technology in social work practice, social work educators shall provide clear guidance on professional expectations and how online tests, discussions, or other assignments will be graded.

Consistent with good educational practice (which is expected in all higher education settings, and is not unique to social work), all educators should provide clear guidance as to how ALL assignments and other learning activities will be assessed. Best practices include clear connections to learning outcomes (i.e., social work competencies), the use of rubrics that specify how the student work will be graded, and the inclusion of self- and peer-assessments.

When the use of specific devices or applications is required to complete an assignment, educators should ensure both that students have access to the appropriate equipment or applications, and that they receive instruction, or have access to training, in the appropriate use of the devices or applications. When the use of technology or technology competency will be included as part of student assessment, educators should consider whether specific technology training is needed as a stand-alone graded component of the assignment. When competency in the use of a particular technology is part of an assignment (e.g., creating an infographic vs. a website), educators should consider tailoring grading criteria to each type of assignment, because different digital literacy skill sets are required depending on the type of technology used in the assignment. Additionally, when technology competency is part of an assignment, the grading criteria should make it clear how much weight is assigned to the technology competency, as well as to the substantive content presented through the technology.

Educators also should provide information on their policies and expectations for students and other constituents when the technology needed for completing an assignment or exam fails. See Standard 4.06 for more guidance.

Standard 4.06: Technological Disruptions

Social work educators shall provide students with information about how to manage technological problems that may be caused by loss of power, viruses, hardware failures, lost or stolen devices, or other issues that may disrupt the educational process.

All social work educators should prepare for technological disruptions in synchronous and asynchronous courses or workshops, and online and onground courses. Examples include during an assignment submission via a learning management system, emailing, when showing a movie in a class, or joining a live online class via video conferencing software. Social work educators should be aware of and educated about institutional supports and processes related to technology on their campuses (i.e., Informational Technology [IT] Help Services, Disability Support Services, computers labs on campus, Wi-Fi access information, etc.), and alternative means of addressing the content in the case of technology failure. This information should be shared with all students, and other constituents such as teaching assistants and administrative staff.

Best practices for preparing for disruptions include development of a course-level disruption readiness plan (DRP) for when technological disruption of a course, test, or assignment occurs. This should include plans for both asynchronistic assignments, and live sessions; working with students, workshop participants and/or colleagues, and be applied in a consistent and ethical manner. Social work educators who make accommodations for students with disabilities should consider specific disruption plans for those students in consultation with the university disability office. Other best practices for a DRP include providing multiple avenues to reference a technological disruption policy for the classroom, and alternate ways of obtaining course information should disruptions occur. Social work educators should also have their own personal DRP in place should their course data be lost or compromised in some way.

Social work educators should advocate for quality student and faculty support services to assist with technological disruptions. They should serve as advocates for their students within the Office of Disability Services, by educating support personnel about the technology-related skills students are expected to perform.

Standard 4.07: Distance Education

When teaching social work practitioners or students in remote locations, social work educators shall ensure that they have sufficient understanding of the cultural, social, and legal contexts of the other locations where the practitioners or students are located.

Distance learning refers to education that is provided to students who are not always physically present at the institution. Examples include online programs or courses and programs where instructors travel to deliver courses at off-campus locations. All social work educators should be mindful that students will have diverse past and future experiences in both geography and client populations, and should instruct students on how to assess their local social, cultural, and legal contexts and apply their learning to local issues, while also understanding how local social work issues translate to other geographical contexts. Social work educators should draw upon the strengths of students who attend campuses from remote geographic locations who may bring increased diversity and ranges of experiences, and take opportunities to use diverse student experience to enhance classroom discussions and learning for everyone.

All social work educators should help all students evaluate their current contexts, bring these contexts into the classroom, and encourage students to use them in the explicit and implicit curricula to enhance the student body culture, and to understand similarities and differences between communities. When planning curriculum, social work educators should prepare students for the varied experiences they will encounter with state laws for issues such as licensing or interpreting public policy, rather than teaching policies based on the university's physical location. Social work educators may also consider consulting with colleagues, locally trained social workers, and other constituents when planning their curriculum. Social work programs should assure that their programmatic policies comply with laws related to educating students across state lines via distance formats and the use of field sites in other states.

Standard 4.08: Support

Social work educators who use technology shall ensure that students have sufficient access to technological support to assist with technological questions or problems that may arise during the educational process.

All social work educators should provide students with specific information about how to access technical support for each relevant aspect of a social work course. Best practices would be to provide support information at the beginning of the course and in the course syllabus. Educators also should inform students at the beginning of the course (or before entering a fully online program) about the types of technology and devices needed to access the course through the institution's learning management system (LMS) and to complete course assignments.

Educators should be knowledgeable about the types of devices and software students are likely to access and use during their courses, and should appreciate the differences in how content might be displayed differently given the variety of devices and software. Additionally, educators should provide information about available technology support at their institutions, such as computer labs, free or affordable software, and/or IT services.

If educators find that technical support is not meeting students' needs, they should inform their administrators of this problem immediately, and, if necessary, modify course expectations to accommodate the situation so that students are not penalized for the educational institutions' failure to provide adequate support. See Standard 4.06 for guidance on how to support students during technology disruptions.

As part of the implicit curriculum, all social work educational programs should work to meet this standard as well. Specifically, programs should be transparent with students about all the technology requirements needed to successfully complete a degree, and provide adequate information about technical support. Additionally, social work programs should advocate on behalf of students, faculty, and staff for access to quality technological support to assist with technological questions or problems that may arise during the educational process.

Standard 4.09:

Maintenance of Academic Standards

When social work educators use technology to facilitate assignments or tests, they shall take appropriate measures to promote academic standards related to honesty, integrity, freedom of expression, and respect for the dignity and worth of all people.

All social work educators should take appropriate measures to promote academic standards related to honesty, integrity, freedom of expression, and respect for the dignity and worth of all people. This includes being aware of and knowledgeable about institutional academic honor codes and policies; the NASW Code of Ethics; academic and non-academic support services (i.e., writing centers, disability services, IT help services, and supported software); and FERPA (NASW, 2017b; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). For each course taught, all educators should provide students with information about how the academic standards are applied in that course, including information about technology-based products that support academic standards such as plagiarism tools or proctoring services.

Best practices for this standard include describing academic support services in all courses regardless of the method of delivery; modeling professional boundaries and respectful language as an instructor and providing exemplars for students; being knowledgeable about the types of technology-based products and services that support academic integrity, how they are used, and how students access these services (i.e., how third-party applications operate; cost to students, etc.); knowing how to assess for social cues across different types of settings; and being knowledgeable about best practices for ensuring academic integrity in online and offline environments. For an additional best practice, see Standard 4.04 on social media policies.

As part of the implicit curriculum, all social work educational programs should promote a culture of academic honesty, integrity, freedom of expression and respect for dignity and worth of all people that is consistent and equal across all courses (i.e., asynchronous, synchronous, online, or seated). Social work educators and programs should advocate for the institutional support that provides academic and non-academic support services and equal access for students in all types of courses and programs.

Standard 4.10: Educator–Student Boundaries

Social work educators who use technology shall take precautions to ensure maintenance of appropriate educator–student boundaries.

All social work educators should be proactive in developing and maintaining appropriate boundaries with students, colleagues, supervisors, alumni, community-based agencies, and other constituents. The NASW Code of Ethics provides guidelines for how to maintain boundaries with colleagues and within the profession, which should similarly be applied to relationships with students in both digital and onground contexts (NASW, 2017b). Educators should work to educate each other about how educator–student boundaries, including ensuring privacy, need to be managed when using technology such as email, texting, learning management systems, and mobile devices. This means that educators should be knowledgeable about the devices, software, apps, and social media platforms that they use as tools of communication and sharing with students (i.e., privacy settings, how to maintain secure Wi-Fi connections, and how to set up password protections and authentication tools). Similarly, educators should follow their institution’s policies on the use of institutional and personal devices to access communications with students, educational records, and course materials.

Best practices for educators around educator–student boundaries include maintaining a social presence that balances professionalism and humanizing interactions, asking students to use and monitor their school email accounts for course-related information, developing a social media policy for interacting on social media with students (see Standard 4.04 for more guidance), sharing guidelines for if, when, and how you will text with students, ground rules for class discussions (online and onground) and consequences for not adhering to the ground rules, and examples of dual relationships between educators and students and how to avoid them. Educators should also be aware of any policies at their institutions related to the use of mobile devices and social technologies and sharing with students, and share these policies with students.

All social work educational programs should also be proactive in helping students, faculty, staff, and field agency supervisors to develop and maintain appropriate boundaries with each other and other constituents in all situations.

This can include developing guidelines or policies for student and faculty handbooks that promote professional boundaries, and helping students, staff, and faculty assess and manage the benefits and risks of using portable devices, social media platforms and other related technology as tools of communication and sharing.

Standard 4.11: Field Instruction

Social workers who provide field instruction to students shall address the use of technology in organizational settings.

Social work educators and field instructors should encourage discussions of agency norms and values related to technology use, and be prepared to help guide students around the use of the NASW Technology Standards in their field settings (NASW, 2017a). Educators should understand both risks and benefits of use of technology in field practicum, prepare students to understand agency use of technology and be transparent about their own use, and assure that they know how to get questions answered about technology use in their field setting when questions arise, as there may not be formal processes within the agency or university for managing these types of issues. Educators should ensure that students have the opportunity to demonstrate and be assessed on their ability for competent technology use during their field instruction experience.

Field instructors should ensure that students understand agency policies and procedures to ensure client privacy, and compliance with all regulations, for all types of data, including digital data. Field instructors also should ensure that students are knowledgeable about agency policies and practices related to the use of social media and other digital technologies with clients, clients' families, agency staff, community resources, and the field educator.

Additionally, universities may have (or choose to invoke) policies about technology use that reach beyond the standard levels of practice in an agency where policies or practices are not yet established or do not provide enough guidance. Examples include policies to help maintain professional boundaries with social media, the use of specific software programs that are HIPAA or FERPA compliant, and/or protocols to be followed when technology disruptions occur (U.S. Department of Education, 2015; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017). See Standard 4.04 for more guidance on social media policies and Standard 4.06 for information on technology disruptions.

Given rapid changes in technology, students may know more than others in their agencies about the intersections of social work values and technology, as well as promising uses for technology with clients. Therefore, students should be

prepared for the possibility that their field agency is not utilizing the current best practices, and be supported regarding where and how to address technology-related ethical concerns that may present themselves in the agency. Students may also be in the unique position to help agencies evaluate or update their technology practices, placing them in a leadership role. This role reversal may require that students receive extra support about how to navigate student-generated recommendations or critiques.

Standard 4.12: Social Work Supervision

Social workers who use technology to provide supervision shall ensure that they are able to assess students' and supervisees' learning and professional competence.

All social workers who provide supervision should ensure that they are able to assess students' and supervisees' learning and professional competence, and provide appropriate feedback, regardless of whether the supervision is provided in the same onground physical space, or if it is mediated by some form of technology. When a client outcome is being assessed, the use of appropriate assessment tools should be considered. For all of these reasons, social workers providing supervision should be knowledgeable in the best practices and most effective research-based methods to assess students' and supervisees' learning, competence, and client outcomes, and should use these methods when appropriate.

Remote supervision that occurs over the telephone or video conferencing software takes unique expertise by the supervisor, who must engage in successful interpretation of both verbal and nonverbal communication, manage emotionally charged discussions, and address professional identity and ethical boundaries. Educators and supervisors who provide supervision mediated by technology should ensure they are trained to provide supervision via these modalities (see Standard 4.03 for more guidance), and that their supervisees receive appropriate training and support with the technology, as well. Best practices include using HIPAA compliant software, having a disruption readiness plan (see Standard 4.06 for more information), and considering cost of and access to software and/or devices for supervisees or agencies. Additionally, social workers who provide supervision and/or who receive supervision may need to advocate for appropriate resources with agency-based administrators.

All social workers who provide supervision shall ensure they are providing appropriate and necessary protection of private and confidential information, regardless of the modality of supervision. All social workers, particularly those in educator and supervisory roles, will need to stay aware of how each state board and/or territory regulates technology in the scope of supervision, and when changes to those regulations occur. All involved professionals (supervisors,

students, and supervisees alike) who engage with technology platforms for supervision must be knowledgeable about current state and federal regulations and guidelines for risk management, privacy, and security (e.g., HIPAA), and regulations related to practicing across state lines. See Standard 4.01 for best practices to stay informed and current on technology.

Resources

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