Social Work Digital Storytelling Project: Digital Literacy, Digital Storytelling, and the Makerspace

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Abstract

Purpose: The Social Work Digital Storytelling project was a research study undertaken to (1) enhance digital literacy of practitioners and students through digital storytelling training, (2) diversify engagement in a local public library technology hub (the “makerspace”), and (3) understand and enhance social work leadership knowledge among students and practitioners through the creation and sharing of leadership-focused digital stories. Method: Free hands-on digital storytelling workshops where social workers/students created stories about leadership exposed social workers to technologies accessible in the community and provided hands-on experience using hardware (e.g., IMac computers, digital cameras, portable data recorders, and a recording booth) and software (e.g., Adobe Photoshop, I-Movie, and GarageBand) as well as online social media platforms (e.g., Flickr, YouTube, and Facebook). Results: Before and after the workshops, participants completed a brief online qualitative self-evaluation survey through which they reflected on their skills, values, and beliefs about digital technology in practice. Participants gained knowledge of perspectives of online ethical tenants and exposure to Creative Commons Copyright and the NASW Technology Standards of Practice. Discussion: Prior to participation, the social workers reported fear and hesitancy using technology. After workshop completion, workers experienced a greater sense of confidence using digital technology as well as identifying organizational and systemic issues, which hindered field-based technological engagement.

Keywords
digital literacy, professional development, library collaboration, digital storytelling, qualitative, outcome study

The Social Work Digital Storytelling (SWDS) project is a community-based research project exploring the use of digital storytelling workshops via a public library makerspace to improve social workers’ digital literacy skills. The SWDS project invited social workers and social work students to participate in digital storytelling workshops at a local public library makerspace. These workshops taught social workers how to create digital stories using technologic resources available within the community, as well as providing information about social work ethics as related to digital media sharing in the online environment.

SWDS participants were asked to create a story focused on social work leadership during the workshop and to share these leadership stories via YouTube in an effort to make local leadership knowledge available to the community. This small project is unique in that it brings together the contexts of social work practice and education, digital literacy training, and the library-based makerspace participation ethos. The overarching goals of the workshops were to support social workers to enhance their digital literacy by gaining greater comfort and familiarity with digital technology and social media sharing. The workshops emphasized collaborative, experiential learning through group writing and reviewing processes and “learning by doing” through hands-on activities using the Makerspace Technology.

Leadership in social work as a topical focus for the digital stories supported the explication of participants’ local leadership knowledge, an area of much needed scholarship (Peters, 2018; Sullivan, 2016). Sharing stories online via YouTube demonstrated the potential of digital storytelling as a resource for social justice–oriented communication (Kidd & Rodrigues, 2010), allowing social workers to exert influence over “how” their profession is understood and how social work leadership is defined and described publicly (La Rose, 2019a; Lundby, 2009).

This article begins with a discussion of the purpose and background of the project, followed by a review of the relevant

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literature. Subsequent sections present a description of the research process and methodology used, a discussion of findings, as well as identification of project outcomes/findings, in addition to limitations and possibilities for future research.

**Purpose and Background**

The SWDS project was a research study undertaken to (1) enhance digital literacy of practitioners and students through digital storytelling training, (2) diversify engagement in a local public library technology hub (the “makerspace”), and (3) understand and enhance social work leadership knowledge among students and practitioners through the creation and sharing of leadership-focused digital stories. Technology in social work practice is more than a tool to be exploited; it is a politically implicated system of resources and processes, bound by history and context (Boddy & Dominelli, 2016; Franklin & Swenarchuk, 2006). This project developed (in part) out of increased regulation of the use of digital media technologies in social work and the need to question who is empowered as a user of technology; what rules and prohibitions are linked to social workers’ use of technology in practice; and how, these processes reflect power relations at play within the profession (La Rose, 2019b). Understanding these phenomena holds the potential to support strategic engagement with technology that may broaden the scope of participation and empowerment within (and beyond) the profession.

**Literature Review**

**Technology in Social Work**

Technological advancements bring many positive changes to social work. The introduction of online resources enhances clients’ awareness of services and, in many cases, facilitates access to a broader range of social welfare resources; online social work training (e.g., professional development) and formal education (e.g., degree programs) enhances the reach and scope of the profession (Boddy & Dominelli, 2016). Databases, e-records, and online documentation systems enhance social workers’ capacity to share and access practice materials across space and time (Kennedy & Yaldren, 2017). Finally, internet-based communication technologies remake local events as global phenomena, opening the door for grassroots communication and advocacy to occur beyond national boards (Boddy & Dominelli, 2016; La Rose, 2019b).

In spite of these benefits, for many social workers and clients, digital technologies reshape practice in undesirable ways. In many instances, technological innovations reflect neoliberal austerity, through which the cost of technology reduces the resources available for direct service delivery (Baines, 2017; Gillingham, 2019; Goyen & Debatin, 2009). In other instances, technologies result in reduced practice autonomy and increased standardization resulting from the subtle introduction of machine learning and artificial intelligence (Gillingham, 2019). Sometimes, technology is used to conduct surveillance on workers and clients, while the linking of data entry activities to funding flow may mean administrative tasks supersede client engagement (Baines et al., 2020; La Rose, 2009, 2016a).

The technological environment surrounding social workers is also described as less than ideal for spiriting innovation. Social welfare agencies and organizations frequently lack the resources to upgrade and maintain infrastructure, meeting only the most basic technical requirements (Kennedy & Yaldren, 2017). Finally, professional regulatory bodies have promoted extreme caution around social workers’ use of digital technologies (National Association of Social Workers, 2017); these cautions may scare workers away from their own self-directed learning for fear that making a mistake while learning to use technology may affect the social workers’ professional reputation (Boddy & Dominelli, 2016; Fitch, 2005; La Rose, 2019b).

**Digital Literacy**

The concept of digital literacy highlights the complex relationships between individuals, technologies, and the many contexts in which they are used. Digital literacy may be defined generally as “the set of skills, knowledge and attitudes required to access, create, use, and evaluate digital information effectively, efficiently, and ethically” (Julien, 2018, p. 2243). Digital literacy supports individual capacity to “locate, organize, understand, evaluate and create information using digital technology” (Bawden, 2001; Gilster, 1997). Detlor et al. (2018) advocate for development of two distinct literacy skills sets: (i) skills to operate and utilize digital technologies such as computers, tablets, and smart phones and (ii) skills to access, create, use, and evaluate digital information.

In social work, digital literacy requires the mediation of social work’s value system and process orientation in addition “to developing . . . not just technological proficiency, but also a wide variety of ethical, social, and reflective practices that are embedded in work, learning, leisure, and daily life . . .” (Media Smarts, 2010, p. 5). For social workers, questions remain as to how and where they might elect to undertake this kind of professional development, such that they would feel comfortable and confident experimenting and exploring without fear of judgement by employers, peers, and professional associations.

**Makerspace Approaches**

Many community-based organizations play active roles in developing digital literacy skills within the communities they serve. For example, public libraries provide a variety of programs and services to promote digital literacy, increase digital comfort, and encourage the adoption and use of digital technologies among community members (Cole & Ryan, 2016; Nordicity, 2018). A key ingredient in digital literacy advocacy by such community-based organizations is the makerspace—“a physical place where informal, collaborative learning can happen through hands-on creation, using any combination of technology, industrial arts, and fine arts” (Bowler & Champagne, 2016, p. 117). Also known as learning labs (Koh & Abbas, 2015), Fablabs, Hackerspaces,
and TechShops (Calvalcanti, 2013), makerspaces provide environments where people are free to experiment with and learn about new technologies in the process of creating or building digital or analog technological artifacts (Bagley, 2014; Bowler & Champagne, 2016). According to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2012), “[m]akerspaces are part of a growing movement of hands-on, mentor-led learning environments to make and remake the physical and digital worlds. They foster experimentation, invention, creation, exploration, and STEM learning” (p. 1).

In this sense, makerspaces are “places where making happens in community” and where learning occurs (Litts, 2015, p. i). Importantly, makerspaces are a special blend of community, space, and tools that provide community members with a “third place” (Litts, 2015). A third place is a space between work and home where people can meet informally and where people are provided with a unique and meaningful sense of worth (Oldenburg, 1989). Makerspaces may be of special interest to social workers who may be fearful of technology and/or hesitant to experiment with digital tools. Makerspaces can provide safe and friendly learning environments (or a third place) for social workers to explore and learn about information technology through the process of creation and experimentation.

Digital Storytelling and Social Work

The complexity of digital storytelling makes it an excellent medium in which to grow and nurture digital literacy skills (La Rose, 2019a). The method utilizes various media such as video, audio, photography, music, and text to construct, communicate, and share narratives. These stories can teach; entertain; build community, connection, and hope; illustrate identities and experiences; and create action (La Rose et al., 2018; Detlor, 2017). The polycontextual nature of digital stories means that developing these online narrative texts as learning activities within the context of a collective learning environment also promotes critical reflexivity (La Rose, 2019a).

Digital storytelling is an arts-informed research practice facilitating participants’ sharing of personal/professional narratives multimodally. It is an approach to narrative research that challenges the limitations of traditional research and knowledge generation techniques and serves to broaden what might be understood as “knowledge” within social work epistemological contexts (La Rose, 2016a, 2016b). Digital stories may be understood as artifacts created by social workers to represent particular events, experiences, values, beliefs, and moments in time (Coudry, 2008). Analysis of the digital story archives supports research and scholarship into the values, beliefs, and perspectives of social workers over time (La Rose, 2019b).

Method

The SWDS project utilized a multiphase research process. The project began with participant recruitment activities and individual orientation meetings. Next, group workshops were undertaken at the library makerspace (participants attended either an 8-hour day long session or two 4-hour evening sessions). A preworkshop online self-assessment survey was provided to participants. Access to an additional “finish-up” support session was held just prior to the conclusion of the project. A postparticipation self-evaluation was also completed after the workshops. Online sharing of completed digital stories was undertaken at the end of all phases of the project.

Research ethics approval was sought (and granted) through the authors’ university research ethics board. The project participants included social work students through a course-based research project at the authors’ university, as well as social workers practicing in the broader community. These two participant populations engaged in unique informed consent processes. Social workers practicing in the field provided informed consent in accordance with standard research ethics board practices. For students, creating a digital story was a required course assignment; however, including the digital stories in the research project and sharing these materials online was voluntary. Informed consent was structured such that students participated in the project but did not consent to include the digital stories in the research until final course grades were posted.

It was hoped that a total of 16 participants would volunteer to be a part of the research (eight students, eight social workers). Participants were recruited via email using departmental e-mail lists, as well as through professional networking activities. In the end, 19 participants committed to the project (13 students, six social workers).

Participants in the research study gave informed consent and completed self-evaluation surveys before the workshops; after the digital stories were completed, participants completed a second self-reflective survey and evaluation as well. Participants were asked to attend an orientation session, received story-planning advice, and attended workshop[s] (1 day, or two evenings) at the makerspace where they created and shared a digital story about social work leadership. Participants were provided with a digital storytelling manual and were encouraged to begin thinking about their digital stories prior to the workshops and were provided “loaner” cameras and audio recording equipment to initiate the creative process independently. After their story was completed and shared, participants were invited to complete a second online survey. Participants were also invited to attend a “Gala” event at the public library which showcased the digital stories created by the research participants and presented preliminary project findings.

The focus of the digital stories on social work leadership helped create a shared topical focus for participants and bolster an area of limited professional scholarship. The workshops provided participants with instruction on creating personal narratives and opportunities for reflection, writing, and collaborating with other social workers. Hands-on practice took place in the makerspace computer lab. Participants were encouraged to develop their own media and were provided with opportunities to use digital cameras and to edit video and photos using software and “green screen” technologies.
To assemble the stories, participants completed voice-over recordings using the makerspace sound booth, cellphones, and/or portable voice recorders. Participants were encouraged to search for and assemble open source media (e.g., video, still and sound files) from the internet and to determine and select materials with the appropriate Creative Commons Copyright (creativecommons.org, n.d.). Participants were taught how to back up their media files, assemble files into a digital story using iMovie, and to share and save their digital stories online. The design of the workshop reflected best practices in makerspace learning perspectives in an effort to enhance personal comfort/confidence with digital technologies, promote the value of do-it-yourself creative engagement, as well as enhance tangible/practical digital skills (Willett, 2016).

In total, four digital storytelling workshops were conducted in the public library makerspace. Two workshops took a 1-day format, two workshops were organized in a two-evening format; these options were offered to facilitate participant scheduling needs. A single “finish-up” session was held for participants with unfinished stories to receive assistance to complete their stories (three participants attended this session). In both groupings, a research assistant and the lead author each facilitated a group.

Of the 19 potential stories created through the project, 16 stories were completed and 11 participants consented to sharing their digital stories via YouTube and to including the stories within the research analysis. The stories reflect broad ranging perspectives of social work leadership as understood by the workshop participants; Table 1 includes information about accessing the stories online and a brief synopsis of each story.

The digital stories created have utility in profiling the meaning of social work leadership and are currently being used in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program at the authors’ university and in other knowledge dissemination contexts, such as workshops and conference presentations. In the future, the content of the stories will be analyzed to develop an understanding of the concordant themes emerging across the corpora of narratives. More generally, the digital stories may have benefit as teaching and learning materials [see: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAcenOq_cTtWUIfNy62tMmC6sNaNGo9yNOJ].

Analysis of participants’ responses to the two surveys was completed manually by the lead author. This was undertaken to promote validity in accordance with the context of narrative surveys. In this context, validity is described by Overcash (2003) as resulting from consistency in the collection and analysis of data (p. 183). In the SWDS project, these narrative surveys were completed online and where support was needed, administered by the project research assistant. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to make meaning from the narrative survey data (Braun et al., 2018) and coding was undertaken manually. This approach emphasizes the importance of the researcher’s relationship to the data and describes subjectivity as a “resource” for analysis. The thematic analysis presented in this paper centers a “post-positivist” orientation (Braun et al., 2018, p. 6), emphasizing analysis of the “lived experiences” and highlighting particular aspects of experience which “influence, underpin, or contextualize particular processes or phenomena” (Braun et al., 2018, p. 8).

As mentioned above, the SWDS project also utilized online surveys which emphasized narrative responses. Three surveys were completed in hard copy due to technical difficulties with the online survey system. Administering surveys before participation in the project helped establish a narrative understanding of the attitudes, values, skills, and experiences participants brought to digital storytelling workshops. Administering surveys after participation encouraged critical reflection and provided evaluation of participants’ satisfaction with the workshops to gain insight into how the participants understood changes to their perspectives on the use of digital technologies in social work practice. The surveys were not administered to develop any broadly generalizable data or to make any statistical claims.

Survey questions were developed through a review of the literature on social workers’ social media participation and digital literacy training. Links to the online surveys were sent to all participants via email prior to orientation and after participants completed their workshop sessions and shared their digital stories. Social worker participants who did not complete the survey prior to orientation were encouraged to do so during the project orientation meeting with help from a research assistant; students were given time in class supported by the research assistant who reviewed the materials in class.

A survey was seen as a useful option for collecting this information from participants as it could be completed at their convenience and did not require additional scheduled time for interviews—a request that seemed quite onerous given participants had already agreed to participate in meetings and workshop sessions. Survey responses were anonymized using chronological numbers assigned by the survey software and these are used to identify respondents’ quotes within this article. The survey provided to participants prior to the digital storytelling workshop included a number of demographic questions related to participants’ identities, work–life, and social work education. These questions revealed the youngest survey respondents were 26 (2), the oldest was 57; the average age was 36.

**Results**

Four (4) respondents held an MSW degree or were currently completing their MSW (4); one participant held both an MSW and a health-related master degree (MSc). At the time of the survey, all participants were employed: Two participants (2) indicated they worked full-time and held one social work job; while two other participants (2) indicated they worked both full and part-time, with both jobs described as social work positions; three participants (3) indicated they worked part-time in two social work jobs with two different employers; one participant indicated they worked three part-time jobs, with two of their three positions identified as social work employment. Seven participants were registered social workers (RSW), all of whom were members of the Ontario College of Social
Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW, 2009/2017a). Four participants indicated they were voluntary members in the Ontario Association of Social Workers.

Seven participants (7) responded to the survey after they completed the workshop. This survey focused on narrative questions about participation in the project and experiences of using digital technology and social media after completing the SWDS project. Analysis of the responses were grouped and organized by relevant themes in the “Findings and Discussion” section below. The dominant themes considered in this analysis are as follows: use of technology; enhancing communication; learning how to learn; rules and norms; blurry boundaries; considering context; professional development; blocking internet access; neoliberalism; and desire for innovation.

Use of Technology
Social workers described their use of digital media technologies before participating in the workshop as reflective of a broad range of practical tasks such as shopping, banking, connecting with friends/family and locating community resources.

Table I. Social Work Digital Story Telling Project—Digital Story Synopsis and Information.

| Creator | Story Title | Synopsis | URL |
|---------|-------------|----------|-----|
| Omo     | Homeless in Hamilton | Issues of homelessness and poverty in Hamilton, Ontario are considered as issues of importance for social work leadership. | https://youtu.be/v38Xlnbtdj0 |
| Katie   | Fat Activism | Findings from Katie’s MSW thesis are considered. Fat-phobia is presented as an area requiring great support from social work leadership. | https://youtu.be/SfHlnWw4wJ_8 |
| Greg    | Beyond the 9 to 5 | This digital story shares reflections on the challenges and opportunities for leadership within community development. | https://youtu.be/AexFcpTI6RU |
| Stacey  | On Social Work Leadership | Consideration of contemporary and historical perspectives on leadership are presented as a way of considering the meaning of social work leadership. | https://youtu.be/-j7m_D2VigM |
| Monica  | Convening Community | This digital story considers the Parkdale Area Resource Center (PARC) (Toronto, ON) and its approach to the creation of affordable housing through the use of a land trust. The concept of leadership and innovation is linked together through narrative. | https://youtu.be/9L91JRcmxel |
| Bashele | Social Work Leadership: Let’s Talk About Face Value | This digital story considers “face value” and its relationship to understandings of social work leadership. Social work as a colonial process and a practice of whiteness are also explored. | https://youtu.be/0dTk8spVots |
| Tory    | Falling Through the Crack | Tory’s digital story considers health care systems and patient center approaches to care. The concept of NUKA care as a model developed in Alaska to encourage patient participation in care processes is reflected as a potential leadership perspective in social work. | https://youtu.be/LXehTZphia8 |
| Ben     | DS | This digital story considers community gardening as a metaphor for the importance of local social work leadership. | https://youtu.be/ZxEl6mbsl8 |
| Robin   | Equity Priorities in Leadership | The SOBI bike sharing program in Hamilton Ontario is considered as an organization where leadership centers equity priorities. | https://youtu.be/4IBbx-b1tnk |
| Helena  | Investing in the Collective | The importance of collectivity and a focus on working together as a social work leadership resources is presented. | https://youtu.be/j6g7-Q8DFug |
| Jenn    | On the Edge | The leadership challenges faced by social workers in contemporary practice and possibilities for shifting understandings of the meaning of “risk” are considered. | https://youtu.be/2oVgFNYwqHg |
| Outreach digital story: La Rose, Detlor and Mule | Understanding Social Work Leadership in Hamilton | This digital story was developed as an outreach resource for recruiting participants to the Understanding Social Work Leadership in Hamilton through Digital Storytelling project (SWDS project). | https://youtu.be/bBIDYeJEAY4 |

Note. SWDS = The Social Work Digital Storytelling.
and life skills such as cooking tips/recipes. Participants also mentioned both passive (**I look but don’t post**) and active (**I look and post**) use of social media sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Reddit, Wordpress, and Instagram. The activities reflected by the social workers are consistent with the literature on social media engagement more generally (Couldry, 2008; Lange, 2009).

**Advocacy Practices**

*Advocacy practices* were highlighted as one of the ways participants used digital technologies. The respondents stated they frequently used the internet and social media to explore social justice campaigns and social movement activities. Responses emphasized participation in ongoing online advocacy; however, participants did not identify themselves as the initiators of online campaigns. One participant (P2) indicated they used social media to express opinions; a statement setting them apart from the rest of the group. Advocacy and participation in social movements and social justice campaigns online are discussed in the literature as a common type of digital engagement among social workers (Boddy & Dominelli, 2016; La Rose, 2019b). Advocacy is closely associated with the social justice goals of the profession and is seen as one of the unique social work practice roles (Baines, 2017). Digital advocacy activities and social media campaigns are natural extensions of traditional social work activities (La Rose, 2019a).

**Enhancing Communication**

In the survey completed after the conclusion of the digital storytelling workshops, participants suggested the SWDS project enhanced their openness to new experiences and creative opportunities. Consistently, the respondents touched on the theme of **enhanced communication** and the potential for the use of **more diverse communication activities** as a result of their participation in this project. Participants saw their new understanding of digital technology and digital storytelling as having the potential to reduce communication barriers within professional contexts as exemplified through the following quote:

> Telling a story and articulating concepts with supporting imagery opens up many possibilities I had not previously considered. I have a reason to upgrade my computer skills and learn more software program options . . . I have a sense of there being new communications options that are accessible to me and others. I have more confidence that I can learn new modalities and this reduces barriers for me. (P4)

Scholars in this area suggest that digital technology is a dynamic communication form and, therefore, presents many options for expanding the range and scope of social work communication activities (La Rose, 2019a).

The participants also emphasized the belief that they needed to develop additional skills to engage digital technologies and apply digital storytelling approaches effectively, particularly in their practice. Several participants indicated the changing nature of social media platforms and digital technologies led them to believe they would continuously need to upgrade knowledge and skills to participate effectively. The literature suggests that the changing nature of digital technologies and online platforms means social workers need to continue to develop knowledge and skills on an ongoing basis (Boddy & Dominelli, 2016). Continued exposure and ongoing use is what allows social workers to develop these skills as they engage and experiment with technologies (Fitch, 2005; La Rose, 2019a, 2019b).

**Learning How to Learn**

While participants indicated they needed additional knowledge, the workshops were understood to have enhanced their capacity to seek out information and resources in order to learn what was necessary for technological engagement. While no respondents claimed to have mastered digital literacy, greater awareness of *how to learn to do something new* was seen as creating greater possibility for engagement; these social workers felt more confidence to experiment since participating in the SWDS project.

The respondents reflected on possible ways to bring digital storytelling methods into their day-to-day practice, which was described as a process of “taking small steps” (P2). Included in these small steps was the decision by three participants to independently return to the makerspace to use technology resources for other projects (e.g., poster making, embroidery printing, and 3D printing). The fact that participants returned to the makerspace independently suggests that in some small way the project goal of enhancing the range of users in the makerspace was achieved.

**Rules and Norms**

In the preparticipation survey, participants were asked to reflect on their knowledge of *rules and norms* related to technology within their workplace[s], within the broader context of professional social work, and to consider how these related to/affected their use of social media and digital technologies. The participants were readily able to identify warnings and prohibitions against the use of social media and internet technologies reflected in both organizational (e.g., place of employment/school) and regulatory policies (e.g., see: OCSWSSW.ca). In reflecting on these, participants suggested employers and regulators fear social workers’ use of technology. Responses emphasized a “risk aversion” orientation by participants, which they described as a response to organizational warnings and formal rules.

In the postparticipation survey, participants reflected more specifically on the risks associated with social media activities and the need to engage in specific types of *harm reduction* rather than avoiding social media and digital technologies altogether. As one participant stated, engaging in online activity holds the potential that a social worker might experience “lots
of backlash’’ (P5). Therefore, ensuring audiences do not have access to personal information (e.g., full name, primary address, place of employment) is an important aspect of social workers’ digital literacy.

Postparticipation respondents suggested the tenor of rules and norms about social media emphasized preventing and avoiding risk to the employer or the profession specifically, a sentiment that is echoed in much of the literature about professionalization and contemporary practice (Baines, 2017; Brookfield, 2009; La Rose, 2019a). Simpson (2016) and Yokoyama (2016) reflect a similar sentiment to that of the participants, suggesting social workers fear the repercussions of using digital technology and social media sharing, not on the basis of risk to self, but risk to organizations and institutions.

**Blurry Boundaries**

Preparticipation survey responses suggested social workers receive contradictory messages about the “boundaries” between personal and professional technology use. Participants indicated they felt this divide was largely arbitrary, in that regulatory regimes and employers expected social workers to engage with a particular kind of decorum/morality consistent with the social work Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005a) and Professional Practice Guidelines (CASW, 2005b). These expectations extend beyond the workplace and beyond working hours, and are well-documented in the literature (Baines, 2017; Brookfield, 2009; La Rose, 2019a). For example, Weinberg (2010) discusses fear of punishment similar to that expressed by these participants; Boddy and Dominelli (2016) also reflect on these experiences of fear in their consideration of social media ethics case studies.

Participants suggested boundaries were a necessary part of risk management; however, postparticipants indicated they could not confidently state where the personal began and the professional ended. Participants asserted this lack of clarity exists in part because RSW with the OCSWSSW and other regulatory colleges are required to disclose personal circumstances, like (for example) their mental health status and history (See: OCSWSSW.ca: SWSSW Act, 1993: R.A., 2018, O.R. 383/00). Rather than seeing a firm division between the person and the profession as most important, postparticipant respondents suggested concern for “context” might be a better indicator of ethical engagement with digital technology and digital storytelling.

Regardless of this analysis, respondents indicated they continued to have concerns or worries about interpretations of technology use and curbed their engagement/use in an effort to protect their professional reputation. As one participant suggested:

> As an employed person, I consider the ramifications of my online presence and how things could be misconstrued—against me. I avoid posting overly political or personal items on my social media. Additionally, I consider the ways in which technology can overtake some aspects of my role in a negative way. I do what I can to keep interpersonal communication as a primary focus . . . . (P3)

This blurriness is significant, particularly when considering the use of digital technologies and social media for communication purposes, which was the most common example of use described by participants in both surveys. Communication activities were categorized as including formal/mandatory activities such as case notes, progress recordings, and collateral fact checking, as well as email, online referrals, and letter writing; informal communication was described through activities like staying in touch with family and friends via social media sites like Facebook, instant messaging, and Instagram.

That being said, informal social media use bled into work-related communication, such as checking in with colleagues, asking for suggestions, and/or seeking information from other social workers. Once again, instant messaging, Facebook groups, or Instagram were used in the work community because these technologies allowed for rapid responses via cellular device; these communication activities constituted a significant form of support for workers in stressful situations, which is affirmed by contemporary scholarship in this area (Boddy & Dominelli, 2016; Yokoyama, 2016).

The use of social media described by participants could also be described as “peer supervision” (Baker, 2018), a type of professional support reflected in the literature as a protector of worker wellness and as a necessity due to neoliberal authoritarianism and managerialism which make clinical supervision a low priority (Baines, 2017; Baines et al., 2020; Baker, 2018). Peer supervision that might have occurred in the lunchroom or over the wall of a cubicle is mediated to the digital realm through social media and supports workers to bear the uncertainty that is part of social work practice (Weinberg, 2010).

**Considering Context**

Participants suggested that context of use might be a better way to understand these subtle differences in social media use. The workers emphasized context was largely missing from discussions of social media and digital technology by employers and regulators (Yokoyama, 2016). This concern is echoed by Weinberg (2010) who suggests contemporary social work ethics lacks both nuance and flexibility. The examples and concerns raised by participants suggest considerations of context in contemporary practice requires attention to the complexity of practice and to increasing expectations placed on workers. As the concept of work and professional identity become more blurry, there is a need to bring context into greater focus, a shift consistent with social work practice traditions (Baines, 2017; Boddy & Dominelli, 2016). The issue of context is explored in greater detail in the discussion of neoliberalism presented later in this article.

**Professional Development**

The social workers surveyed reflected an appreciation for digital media technologies as resources supporting professional
development and improved quality of care for service users/clients. Respondents commonly commented on the benefit of online resources in facilitating access to information and practice innovations. In the postparticipation survey, technology was described as supporting “currency and competency” by participants, as well as allowing workers to “stay fresh . . . [by] keeping up with policy changes.” (P4)

The capacity to develop a deeper understanding of issues facing clients was another important application of digital media cited by respondents. As one worker reflected:

I often use online resources to research services, information about diagnoses and issues a client may be facing . . . I also participate in professional development courses/webinars . . . Online resources allow me to stay on top of new developments and research about practices which improve[s] my ability to provide quality of care. It also allows me to stay informed about issues that matter to clients . . . (P1)

Postparticipation survey responses discussed contributing to social work knowledge/expertise online. Respondents indicated online social work communities are places where information about services and resources are shared and informal recommendations about agencies and services based on experiences gleaned through practice are considered important knowledge. Boddy and Dominelli (2016) also reflect these considerations of social workers’ use of social media technologies.

Internet Access

In the postparticipation survey, some participants suggested that social workers’ capacity to engage with digital technologies and online social media platforms may be blocked by employers who restrict access to the Internet or particular sites such as YouTube, a practice also reflected in the literature (Yokoyama, 2016). While YouTube may be used recreationally, many YouTube videos now focus on learning/instruction and may be directly related to the work at hand. Therefore, employers who block internet access potentially limit employees’ capacity to engage in professional development or to support the needs of clients. Yokohama (2016) suggests that controlled internet access also reduces worker morale, job satisfaction, and affinity for the workplace—costs that employers may not consider in their desire to control distractions. This idea was reflected in the following statement by respondent P1:

[In] my child welfare position, we are blocked from accessing many sites (particularly social media) from work computers/networks. This is difficult, as social media is often used for investigative purposes, such as accessing photos for youth in care to create lifebooks . . . (P1)

Neoliberalism

Survey participants suggested workload and workplace standardization were significant obstacles to integrating digital technologies and social media use into practice. Workers felt they would not have time to use these technologies at work, or that their work design did not allow them the flexibility needed. Furthermore, the climate of evidence-based practice was discussed as limiting the value placed on practices where learning by doing and experimentation were required and where absolute outcomes could not be guaranteed, such as in the case of digital storytelling.

Participants note that workload and work design limited their capacity to be creative and innovative; these social workers worried about simply meeting the requirements of their job with little hope of doing anything extra. Within contemporary social work, issues of workload and work design are frequently cited as preventing social workers from practicing in ways workers feel are most consistent with social work values and ethics (Baines, 2017; Boddy & Dominelli, 2016; La Rose, 2016a). There is little reason to believe that digital literacy and the use of social media would in any way be exempt from these effects. However, there is little research that explicitly considers the relationship between social work workloads and the use of digital technologies, internet-based resources, and social media; perhaps this is an area where additional research is warranted.

The limitations described by the workers reflect understandings that contemporary social work environments are largely shaped by neoliberal ideologies, which emphasize efficiency, risk aversion, standardization, and “evidence”-based practice often at the cost of innovation and adaptiveness (Baines, 2017; Boddy & Dominelli, 2016). In this way, social workers’ capacity to use digital media technologies in practice is limited by contemporary ideological principles.

Weinberg (2010) suggests neoliberalism is remaking social work ethics and values, arguing these new ethical approaches limit social workers’ capacities to interpret and implement policies in context, which in turn limits the potential for innovation and interpretation of action such that social change orientations are maximized. These foci move social work away from concerns about macro issues, which could be explicated and shared in common reflections online through digital storytelling. Weinberg’s analysis is largely congruent with the participants’ sense there is little room for digital storytelling and digital technologies in their current work contexts—in part because of a lack of space and tolerance for critical reflection.

Desire for Innovation

Politics, obstacles, fears, and doubts aside, respondents overwhelmingly indicated they hoped to incorporate social media and digital storytelling into their social work practice going forward. Of particular note was the reflection provided by P3 who commented on the “need for additional resources” in order to be able “to apply enhanced skills.” Respondents discussed the importance of knowledge in advancing their own potential of using digital media. Knowing more meant digital storytelling felt more accessible, as the quote below suggests:
...Being able to work through questions and then actually work on a digital media project was very helpful...Really liked the practical component and walking away with new skills in this area...as well as new ways of thinking about intersections between our profession and the use of digital technologies. Often times we don’t talk about the use of digital technologies in social work because of the perceived “inherent risks,” so it was great to be able to discuss and work through some of these tensions while learning and developing new skills. (P7)

**Project Outcomes, Limitations, and Next Steps**

The SWDS project utilized digital storytelling as a resource for enhancing social workers’ digital literacy skills and confidence using digital media and internet-based social media sharing. Use of the public library makerspace allowed social workers to explore resources available within their community, to support technological innovation and skill development for themselves, and by extension for the clients they serve. Participants in the SWDS workshops created leadership-focused digital stories as a means of enhancing skills, comfort, and confidence with digital technologies, as well as considering the application of social work ethics in the online environment. Participants also tapped into their own knowledge of social work leadership and contributed to social work leadership knowledge through the creation and sharing of their digital stories online.

The project resulted in 19 social workers actively engaging with digital technology, gaining greater familiarity with the makerspaces, and developing enhanced digital literacy skills. The project produced 11 digital stories about social work leadership shared online via YouTube (see: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAcen0q_cTtWufNy62tMmC6sNaNGo9yNO). The stories reflect a broad range of topics related to social work leadership as understood by the workshop participants.

The digital stories created have utility in profiling the meaning of social work leadership and are currently being used in the MSW program at the authors’ university and in other knowledge dissemination contexts, such as workshops and conference presentations. In the future, the content of the stories will be analyzed to develop an understanding of the concordant themes emerging across the corpora of narratives. More generally, the digital stories may have benefit as teaching and learning materials (see https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAcen0q_cTtWufNy62tMmC6sNaNGo9yNO).

The SWDS project was a small pilot project designed to enhance social workers’ digital literacy skills and confidence using digital technologies and social media sharing. Targeted participation was exceeded by three participants. The equal distribution of participants between MSW students and social workers in practice was not met, with only six of the 19 participants coming from practice. Not all participants completed and shared their digital stories; the hoped for outcome of 16 stories was not met, with only 11 stories being shared online.

Self-evaluation surveys were used to understand the skills participants brought with them as they participated in the project and to understand their experiences of participation in the project. The small number of surveys returned (eight and seven, respectively) made detailed analysis and establishment of trends difficult. The responses from participants were considered generally and compared to knowledge mobilized in currently published peer reviewed literature. Participants also demonstrated support for their self-assessment through tangible actions like returning to the makerspace to complete independent activities not tied to their participation in the SWDS project.

One of the most significant challenges faced was the recruitment of practicing social workers. Initially, the plan was to recruit social workers currently serving as field instructors. However, an inadequate number of responses was received and recruitment was expanded to include social workers practicing in the field more generally. While the ratio of students to community participants is not equal, to some degree the division of student/practitioners is arbitrary; many students work while they study and many practitioners study while they work. The model used in the project is simple to replicate in other communities/contexts where public access to makerspaces supports access to digital technologies. As a globalized profession, social workers can be found all across the world, meaning that social workers’ need for enhanced digital literacy is a global concern. Enhancing social workers’ digital literacy through engagement in hands-on workshops holds the capacity to enhance connection and understanding both locally and globally.

**Conclusion**

The SWDS project explores the use of digital storytelling workshops to improve social workers’ digital literacy. The SWDS project invited social workers and social work students to participate in digital storytelling at a city’s library makerspace as a means of developing digital literacy skills and gaining greater comfort and familiarity with digital technology and social media sharing. Participants developed digital stories focused on social work leadership through collaborative experiential workshops.

The project, while small in scope (19 participants), brought three unique contexts together: social work, digital literacy education, and library-based makerspace participation. Leadership in social work was the topic for the digital stories which provided a shared focus among participants and supported the development of knowledge in a much needed area of social work scholarship. The sharing of the stories online demonstrates the potential of digital knowledge mobilization.

The SWDS project was a pilot project designed to enhance social workers’ digital literacy skills and confidence; therefore, the limited size and scope of the project means it is unreasonable to see the knowledge generated as having great generalizability. However, the digital stories created may be understood as a corpus of data ripe for narrative content and
discourse analysis; analysis that is forthcoming. These digital stories may also be understood as a valuable source of knowledge about social workers in the community and about social workers’ perspectives of leadership. As video-based texts, these materials are available as open-access narratives via the internet; the texts may serve as resources for education, training, and promotion of the profession and add to a much needed scholarship.

The project also suggests the potential of working in non-traditional collaborations as a means of mobilizing resources and enhancing access to knowledge and expertise. Collaboration between social work services and library resources is an emerging area of interest and inquiry. This project demonstrates many of the natural symmetries between the goals of libraries, social work values, and the needs of social service users. By allowing social workers the opportunity to explore library resources firsthand, the potential for social workers to refer and collaborate within libraries is enhanced. This collaboration also enhances the potential that social work goals and values will become a part of what is learned within the makerspace environment.

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