

# Distance Social Work Education:

**Building Accessibility, Community, and Diversity On-line**



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More than a century ago distance education was already on the agenda of universities in North America. In 1892, the University of Chicago wrote in its Official Bulletin that distance education “has been associated with a quintessential aspect of the university’s commitment to the betterment of society and individuals” (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006, p. 574), furthering that the university had a social and moral responsibility to reach out to students who would not traditionally have access to higher education.

“The School of Social Work, Dalhousie University is committed to building a socially just society, defined as one that upholds and validates the values of equality, diversity, inclusiveness, democracy, and concern for human welfare” (School of Social Work, Dalhousie University, 2006). Our curriculum and pedagogical practices follow this mission and vision statement. Distance delivery of our programs is congruent with providing accessible social work education and building community and diversity amongst our faculty and student body and the wider social work community.

For the School of Social Work, distance education first began

in 1995 with the Cape Breton program. We delivered our Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program in a combination of on-site and distance delivery, designed to overcome a geographical barrier. This evolved to the launch in September 2001 of our national distance delivery of both undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

The Master of Social Work (MSW) program is delivered completely on-line and the BSW program consists of on-line courses plus a two week on-site residency at the Dalhousie University campus. The BSW and MSW programs are generally taken over three years of part-time study. Proposed modifications to the BSW and MSW programs will include a 24-month schedule of completion. To date, we have graduated 104 BSW students and 160 MSW students. Our eighth BSW and MSW cohorts have just begun their studies.

**Accessibility:** The School has traditionally been committed to geographical and culturally accessible education, as illustrated through our distance delivery programs, our Cape Breton program, and our current Mi’kmaq/Maliseet BSW program delivered in partnership with St. Thomas University. In addition, distance

delivery has allowed us to extend our reach to students with (dis)abilities, students with young children, and working students. Many students today cannot afford to leave their jobs to attend university; distance education provides the option of part-time study within the student’s own, often rural, community. According to Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006), distance education increases the democratization of education by providing access to people traditionally excluded through class lines.

For students with visual, mobility, learning, mental health, and chronic health (dis)abilities who have taken our programs on-line, an accessible on-line learning environment is as essential as a physically accessible campus (Burgstahler, Corrigan, & McCarter, 2004). In 2006 we received a Teaching with Technology grant from the Centre for Teaching and Learning at Dalhousie to further develop an online course that adheres to web-based accessible standards (Web Accessibility Initiative, W3C) and to principles of universal design. We streamlined content formatting to provide for easy navigation. By structuring the layout of the online content with respect to font size,

color, style, contrasting yet soft tones and by providing a variety of pedagogical processes, we were able to adapt the course to different learning needs. Electronic versions of text benefited both students with visual (dis)abilities, for whom English is a second language, and auditory learners. For visually impaired students, we tagged text notes for screen readers; for those with hearing impairments we provided both visual and auditory content through video clips that included text. By utilizing asynchronous communication tools, students with mobility and learning (dis)abilities were able to read and respond to postings online in a timeframe that suited their learning style.

**Community:**  
Distance

delivery of our programs is not correspondence study; it is highly interactive, utilizing various communication tools including discussion groups, e-mail, voice tools, chat rooms, and so forth. In an adult learning model of education, students participate in the creation of learning opportunities. For example, small groups may decide to meet on-line at specific times, create chat room venues, create collaborative content, and find other ways of connecting within the course. Whether due to the perceived social distance of being at the other end of a screen or to some other phenomenon, our students tend to be willing to share their personal and professional lives with their

fellow students and instructors. On-line learning promotes community building, collaboration, and peer learning (Littlefield & Roberson, 2005). Academically, students have helped each other in the navigation of the online course, challenged each other's views in a respectful manner, provided resources for assignments, or illustrated a social work theory/practice link with examples from their own practice.

Students have also supported each other through personal health crises, family or community struggles, and work and school dilemmas.

Teaching in distance programs can also affect teacher-student relationships. Gilmore and Warren (2007) found that faculty teaching on-line

experienced a greater emotional connection with their students compared to campus teaching. The relationships forged can be quite powerful. Our MSW distance students come from across the country for convocation so that they can meet each other and faculty face-to-face for the first time. Likewise, our BSW students come for the on-site residency with the foundation of teambuilding and group cohesion already established online.

**Diversity:** An exciting aspect of on-line teaching and learning is the diversity among individuals involved in a course. Our School has always promoted diversity, through our affirmative action admissions policy (AA policy), the

designated hiring of faculty, and the work of the School's Diversity and Equity Committee.

Country-wide representation of students and faculty enriches discussions about practice and policy from diverse practice areas and from multiple jurisdictions across Canada. Students and faculty share their unique personal, community, and work experiences.

Within our distance delivery programs are students who identify from a variety of ethnic origins, including Chinese-Canadian, Indo-Canadian, African Canadian, various Aboriginal groups (Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Ojibwa, Cree), and new Canadians. Representation from an array of spiritual practices includes Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Our experiences tell us that faculty and student diversity in ability, age, class, race, and sexual orientation facilitates knowledge construction and understanding within the on-line learning environment.

Increasing access to social work education through distance delivery was a founding component of the social work program at Dalhousie University. With a commitment to diversity, the building of community, and accessibility, populations that have traditionally been less represented within the profession should begin to find an identity within social work.



*“On-line learning promotes community building, collaboration, and peer learning”*

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- Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C). Web content accessibility guidelines. Available: <http://www.w3.org>

## **Want to learn about designing or teaching an online course? Here are some of the books you can borrow from the Centre for Learning and Teaching:**

- G. Collison, B. Elbaum, S. Haavind, R. Tinker. 2000. *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators*
- R. Colvin Clark and R. Mayer. 2003. *eLearning and the Science of Instruction*
- R.M. Conrad and J.A. Donaldson. 2004. *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction*
- R. Paloff and K. Pratt. 2001. *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching*  
2003. *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners*  
2005. *Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community*  
2007. *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*
- M. Simonson, S. Smaldino, M. Albright, and S. Zvacek. 2009. *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education*
- R. Smith. 2008. *Conquering the Content: A Step-by-Step Guide to Online Course Design*