

## ***The power of a “wiki tool” in social work students’ field training during the Covid lockdown.***

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on sharing a teaching experience implemented by the Social Work faculty of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili of Tarragona (Catalonia, Spain) with the students in the last year of the Social Work degree, whose practical training was interrupted due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Considering this scenario and maintaining contact with the students through the virtual campus, the creation of a Wiki tool on the university's Moodle platform was proposed to the students. The principal objective was to accompany and give teaching support to students to get through this difficult situation. The use of the Wiki was valued as a positive experience that made it possible to configure, in a collaborative and creative way, a common space of reflection and analysis for the students. The usefulness of this new virtual methodology in university training is a complement to their face-to-face training, and in addition, it represents a small contribution to the development of students' self-care practices in a complex reality. In conclusion, the students themselves stress that it is essential to continue training and to be open to applying new professional methodologies.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Field Training, Virtual Activity, Spain, Pandemic

### **Disruption of the practical academic training process**

Internationally, practical education is considered a key element in the curriculum of the Social Work bachelor’s degree. At the Rovira i Virgili University practical training is included in the Social Work degree as an annual obligatory subject during the 4<sup>th</sup> academic year, called *Practicum*. Students must perform 375 hours of practical training (field education/practices) in contexts outside the university, focusing on specific elements of the professional role (García-Moreno and Anleu-Hernández, 2019). It takes place over a period of 6 months, 15 hours per week, and students will obtain a deeper and more comprehensive view of the service or organization.

This subject is organized to provide students with a double training accompaniment favoring both the qualitative and the subjective character of the learning process. On the one hand, there are the academic tutors (trained in social work and including the authors of this essay) who

conduct bi-weekly two-hour sessions to supervise the field practices: on the other hand, there are social workers who, from their workplaces, play the role of *tutors* or practice advisors.

When the national state of emergency was declared in March 2020, the Spanish Ministry of Education ordered the suspension of all field practices, which meant an abrupt and unexpected end to the practical training process for our students. They had started their practical training four months before, but they were still two months away from finishing. Whilst almost all the professional tutors continued to do their work either on a shift basis or remotely, it was impossible for the students to continue their practicum virtually, meaning that the students left a formative process unfinished, a process which they had looked forward to throughout the degree, leading to fear, insecurity, and other negative feelings.

On the one hand, they felt frustrated that they could not finish the practicum and discouraged about the loss of employment possibilities that could have arisen. On the other hand, they were relieved because they were able to avoid the risks of possible contagion, but they were also concerned about the general situation in the country and about their professional tutors, with whom they kept in touch for more than purely academic reasons. They also showed concern for many of the families they had met while doing their field practices and who already had serious economic and/or social difficulties before the pandemic began.

### **The application of a Wiki tool as teaching support for the students**

As academic tutors, we kept in touch with both professional tutors and students by email. The main objective was to clarify possible doubts about the reports that the students had to submit at the end of their field practices as an evaluative part of the subject. However, considering other studies about how moments of economic crisis or health emergencies could be also an opportunity to rethink future professional practices (García-Moreno and Anleu-Hernández, 2019; Fronck and Rotabi-Casares, 2022), we hoped to promote an educational possibility for students' self-knowledge to analyze future social work practices.

,We therefore created a specific activity with the objectives of accompanying and giving teaching support to students to face the situation, to incorporate a new teaching methodology for self-knowledge and the identification of students' emotions, and finally to reflect on the role of social work during the pandemic. It was important that the activity could be easily developed online (due to the lockdown), be dynamic and attractive to students, and also be managed individually and collectively. We finally proposed the creation of a Wiki on the university Moodle platform. In short, a Wiki is a web-based collaborative platform that enables users to store, create and modify content in an organized manner. As Duffy and Bruns (2006) stated, one of the many uses of Wikis is that professors can use them as a knowledge base, enabling students to share reflections and thoughts regarding content or experience.

We considered it important to incorporate the usage of new technologies into university training, even in an on-site, in-person degree like ours. We designed three Wikis, as we had 73 students, mostly women, registered during the 2019-2020 academic year, meaning smaller groups for better interaction.

The activity was voluntary, and it consisted in reflecting on and answering four questions and then sharing them creatively in the assigned Wiki. The inquiries were as open as possible to collect qualitative issues, and it was important that the students felt free to express themselves. They were first asked to think about their feelings during the lockdown and look on the web for the image that best described it.

The individual reflection was shared and visualized by the rest of the classmates. After twenty days (the time the activity was open) all the participants had access to material elaborated collectively.

The four issues considered by the 73 students who participated in the activity were:

**1) Regarding how they felt on a personal level about the new situation**, all the students mentioned how at the beginning of the social and health emergency they felt a lot of insecurity, a lack of motivation and a fear of the unknown. Some of them mentioned worrying that they would have incomplete training, making them insecure about themselves and how it would affect their professional future. Even so, they recognized that these initial fears and insecurities were gradually transformed into the positive vision that many had later. They recognized the desire to continue training, to learn, to work and to fight for the profession. They kept an open mind and raised the need to reflect and look for new methods of intervention. According to one of them, "now more than ever we have to show why we have chosen this career".

Similarly, an idea present in most of their reflections was that they believed they had changed at a personal level because of the Covid-19 lockdown. We classified the images selected to reflect how they felt into four groups: those related to initial fears and doubts; those reflecting uncertainty and not knowing what to do; those showing capacity and decision when facing a new reality; and finally, those showing positivity, achievements, strength, and changes.

**2) About the role of social work in this pandemic**, they all referred to the fact that it was one of the fundamental professions during the lockdown, being in the front line of intervention, taking on new responsibilities, making quick decisions and giving immediate responses. They alluded to the fact that social services should be considered as social Intensive Care Units, since social workers manage emotional and economic first aid. Nevertheless, they regretted how in Spain, even today, their work is not properly recognized by the government, and their functions continue to be unknown by a high percentage of the population. They also mentioned the invisibility of the profession and the fact that the situation caused by Covid did not help in this respect; in the media, practically no mention was made of the important role played by social workers. Most of the students stressed that it is time to claim the recognition that social work has long deserved.

Based on the virtual contacts the students had with their tutors during the lockdown, they believed the professionals' capacity to adapt and their flexibility in the new reality was remarkable. It should not be forgotten that this directly affected the work of some professionals who were already overwhelmed before, due to the economic crisis that started in Spain in 2008 and is still present today.

**3) Regarding the risks generated by COVID in social work intervention methodology**, they were concerned about the prevention measures established to deal with the contagion. Among them, social distancing was considered the one with the greatest impact, since it would negatively affect relationships with persons and families, communication, the helping relationship and, above all, bond creation and consolidation. This aspect is important for intervention quality in every case, but above all in specific areas such as mental health.

Another risk identified by the students was the danger faced by the profession of promoting or strengthening welfare practices due to the increase in demands and the scarcity of resources. In addition, they considered there would be a risk in not having enough time to develop key social work activities, such as exploring each case in detail, preparing complete social diagnoses, evaluating the capacities or strengths of the people attended, etc. This would have a direct

impact on the right to personal dignity and the commitment to the development of a fair society, both of which are fundamental principles of the profession.

**4) With respect to how our profession should cope with the post-coronavirus reality,** students agreed that social work would be a key profession in tackling social inequalities, and also to continue insisting on people's rights, decent living conditions and social justice. They see the current situation as an opportunity to promote community social work (poorly developed in Spain) and to strengthen teamwork.

Moreover, they have not forgotten the need for political commitment to the profession to provide resources. We see how, through their practical training, they have already been able to detect the lack of professional, institutional, and economic resources to practice the profession properly. These resources have been insufficient until now and must be improved given the worsening situation.

#### **Evaluation of the technique and aspects of teaching interest**

Once the contributions and reflections of the students from the last year of the degree in Social Work had been analyzed, we could recommend the Wiki as a very powerful tool that can be applied to other teaching contexts. It can promote, in a collaborative and creative way, a common space to share opinions about a topic, jointly analyze a social reality and also include external links to support materials, etc.

Although the Wiki technique already existed in the educational field, in this case, the novelty is that it has also become a very useful tool for identifying and sharing emotions and feelings. This has been enhanced by the proposal to share not only text but also images or visual materials, as previously demonstrated by other authors (Chapman, et al. 2014; Marelize, 2020).

Like other authors, (Griffiths, Royse, Murphy, &, Starks, 2019; Moore, Bledsoe, Perry, & Robinson, 2011), we recommend its use in social work education as a training tool contributing to the development of practices related to student self-care, **a new topic in the academic field** still not properly addressed in Spain (Anleu-Puig, 2022).

We also recognize and urge the use of this tool as a great complement to face-to-face university training, especially in this post-covid era, where virtuality has arrived to stay, so we consider it essential to introduce virtual methodologies that enrich the academic practice of both teachers and students. In this sense, the works collected in López Peláez and Kirwan (eds.) (2023) explore the main intersections between the theory and practice of social work, providing a critical approach to how the discipline must adapt to the benefits of technology in an increasingly digitalized world. Meanwhile, López Peláez, Erro-Garcés and Gómez-Ciriano (2020) note that higher education institutions are beginning to include digital competences in social work curricula, although they recognize that more initiatives are needed. In the specific case of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili, and as a result of this experience, the Wiki tool has been incorporated into the methodology of professional practice.

Furthermore, it should be noted that this technique has generated a space for students to reflect on their future professional practice; they consider that social work is on the threshold of a great change, for which they believe it is necessary to increase their professional training and develop new work methodologies that facilitate intervention in increasingly challenging and complex realities, and we can affirm that the application of the Wiki has made it possible to develop the students' critical and analytical vision, which was one of the original objectives.

Finally, in connection with students' opinions, Fronek and Rotabi-Casares (eds) (2022) highlight that social work is entering a new era in terms of service provision, making it necessary to recognize and document new practices that will have an impact on the future development of the profession. Likewise, some studies acknowledge the importance of incorporating digital competences into professional practice. López Peláez, Suh and Zelenev (eds), (2023) show how digitization and better provision of information and communication technologies (ICTs) can improve access to a wide range of social services, rendering them more inclusive and protecting citizens' rights, so both students and future social workers need to improve their digital competences and act as mutual promoters in the process (López Peláez, Erro-Garcés, Gómez-Ciriano, 2020).

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